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GENTLEMAN JOE THE GILT-EDGED SPORT

BY JOS. E. BADGER JR.



THE GILT-EDGED SPORT HAD DRIVEN A DAGGER THROUGH HAND AND CASH, PINNING THE GAMBLER FAST TO THE TABLE.

GENTLEMAN JOE, THE GILT-EDGED SPORT; OR, Beating a Royal Flush.

By JOS. E. BADGER, Jr.

CHAPTER I.

A SOCIAL GAME OF DRAW.

It was rather too early in the evening for sport to be "rushing," even at so popular a resort as "The Oasis," but Hardscrabble was a lively town, even before entering upon its present unexampled boom, and even her "chiefs" were not above patronizing a side show while waiting for the main circus to open.

Ever since Johnny McGill fell heir to the Oasis (thanks to his rare skill in the art of drawing; first, cards; second, guns), that establishment was certain to catch its full share of whatever sport there might be afoot, nor was this particular evening to prove an exception.

Only one of the faro-tables had opened for business, and even that was slimly patronized as yet, for the early supper-hour had barely passed, and the attention of the few early birds was fixed upon one of the round card-tables at the opposite side of the room, where three men were indulging in a social game of draw-poker.

Two of these gentlemen were well known in Hardscrabble, being Thomas King, and Fred, *alias* "Lucky" Jackson; but the third player was a stranger to nearly every person present, although Tom King once or twice called him Thompson, without either title or affix.

A speedy plucking was predicted for this wandering pigeon by those who knew his adversaries best, but Mr. Thompson was making a gallant fight against odds, and proving himself anything but a novice at the so-called "national game."

Lucky Jackson proved his title well-applied by winning another valuable pot on a show-down, and the deal passed to Mr. King, when an unexpected interruption came from one of the spectators, who had been standing directly behind Mr. Thompson's chair for some little time.

Stooping down, he picked something from the floor, deftly smoothing the object with his fingers, as he passed it over the player's shoulder with the words:

"Yours, I fancy, pardner, since I picked it up at your feet."

Mr. Thompson gave a start at that address slightly shrinking from that white, shapely hand, yet with keen eyes fixed upon the oblong bit of tinted paper—a five-dollar treasury note.

"A sleeper, eh?" observed Lucky Jackson from the opposite side of the table. "Take your luck-piece, pardner, unless you'd rather I'd claim it for my own."

He saw merely a five-dollar bill, but Mr. Thompson saw more than that, and before other eyes could decipher those boldly written words in pencil on the white oval space, his hand crumpled the bill up, and he turned partly around in his seat, to exclaim:

"Well, of all good luck! When did you drop down, pardner? And how did you leave 'em all? And how's the world using you, anyway? And why don't you—friend of mine, gentlemen, and just in time to round out our little game by making it four-cornered. Don't say no, old rocks, for I'll not have it that way."

"A division of hard luck, you think, Thompson?" lightly spoke the other, slipping into the vacant seat, with a half-apologetic glance at the other couple as he blandly added: "No objections, of course?"

Tom King frowned blackly, but Lucky Jackson lightly cried:

"Not at all, sir. I'd just as soon win Gentleman Joe's good money as another's, and, if he's smart enough to win mine, I'll never kick."

"And you, Mr. King?" still more smoothly asked the new-comer. "Of course, if you object, why——"

"Object you, object me," cut in Mr. Thompson, with a sudden scowl of his own. "If an old pard can't chip when invited, why, that lets me out as well."

"Am I kicking?" coldly asked King, dealing the cards. "Saint or sinner, black, red, yellow, or white, I'll play any who come, as long as my bank holds out. When that fails—well, time enough to think of the next move when that happens."

"We can't all be chiefs, of course," said Lucky Jackson, deftly "skinning" his hand, his famous smile never altering in the least degree. "Hardscrabble is only big enough to support one Gilt-Edged Sport, and his name is Gentleman Joe Gentry. Still, maybe we can keep him from going to sleep over the papers, and——"

"Oh, hush!" exploded King, in open disgust. "Is this a card-party, or a slobbering match? If cards, let them do your talking, Jackson."

"All right, your honor, and my cards talk just so loud," smilingly retorted the gambler, pushing a bank-note to the center.

That meant business, and now that the game was fairly opened, very few words were wasted by any of the party.

Each one of the quartette was thoroughly familiar with the game, its rules, its chances, its possibilities, and as experts they let cards and cash do the talking, while only an occasional soft whisper came from the interested spectators, now comprising nearly all in the room.

Thomas King, tall, dark, almost grimly saturnine with his jetty brows meeting above his aquiline nose and ink-black eyes, wearing a full beard and heavy mustache which served admirably as a mask, covering the lips which might otherwise have betrayed his hand.

Lucky Jackson, of medium height and build, though slightly inclined to portliness, furnished a strong contrast in almost every respect to his friend, and, as many people said, his master.

His skull was nearly bald, the thin fringe of hair being of a peculiar tint, jocularly termed "strawberry blonde," as was the heavy mustache which curved out and downward, shading both lips and chin.

His manner was free-and-easy, verging on the hilarious, lending the impression of a frank, whole-souled sport; but those who knew him best, declared that he was never more dangerous than when smiling his sweetest.

Mr. William Thompson, as he had given his name, was now paying his first visit at the Oasis, having spent less than four-and-twenty hours in Hardscrabble according to his own account.

He was something above the average height, well-built, muscular, and easy-moving, apparently not far from forty years of age. He wore a full beard of unusual luxuriance, nut-brown in color, of the same shade as his heavy crop of hair, which fell in curling ends almost to his shoulders.

He wore a plain business suit of mixed goods, but about his waist was buckled a cartridge-studded belt of silk webbing, which supported the regulation pair of serviceable revolvers.

The fourth member of the party, Joseph Gentry, or Gentleman Joe as he was far more generally known, was even better deserving a second look than any of his present companions.

In height he was an inch or two under the six-foot standard, would tip the scales at one-seventy, and had just completed his twenty-eighth year of life.

His complexion was marvelously clear and pure for one who led a sporting life. His hair had been permitted to grow for the past year, and now fell in curling, silken locks, yellow as pure gold. His carefully trained mustache and imperial were a shade or two lighter, admirably matching his pink-and-white complexion, and his steel-gray eyes.

A dude? A girl-man? Not a bit of it.

A braver soul, a cleaner heart, a more manly man never drew the breath of life, than was this same Gentleman Joe.

Only a few months had passed by since he first stepped foot in the live and lively mining-camp of Hardscrabble, but long ere this present night he had established the reputation of a man who would "fight at the drop of a hat."

Not that he was quarrelsome, or desirous of winning the reputation of being "a chief," but a single attempt to im-

WITHDRAWN
from
OBERLIN COLLEGE

pose upon him, ended so disastrously to the three toughs engaged that Gentleman Joe was then and there voted the freedom of the city, so far as fighting for a foothold was concerned.

Still, it was pretty generally known that very little love was lost between the Gilt-Edged Sport and the particular "gang" of which Tom King and Lucky Jackson were units, and something in the manner of the three men on this occasion, intensified the interest with which that "social game of draw" was watched.

Yet a quieter party could hardly have been imagined once the cards were fairly in play. Even Lucky Jackson held his tongue, though his habitual smile was still visible.

The betting ran high, as is sure to be the case where men are engaged who know the full value of a poker hand, and simply because they were all experts at the game, winnings and losses were about balanced at the end of the first half-hour, even Mr. Thompson "holding his end level," now that a new hand had entered the game.

But then, with Lucky Jackson dealing, there came a change, and matters began to grow more interesting, not only to those in play, but to the lookers-on as well.

Mr. King, holding the ace, of course preferred waiting, but Mr. Thompson only required a single glance at his hand to push a fair-sized note to the center. Gentleman Joe quietly doubled that amount, and Smiling Jackson lightly favored Gentry after the same fashion.

Tom King contented himself by coming in on the level, but Thompson not only met the double raise, but gave another flyer to fortune. This raise was met all around, after which there came a lull in the betting, each player apparently thinking he had risked enough before drawing.

When the discard was made, King took two cards, Gentleman Joe three, Thompson two, and Lucky Jackson likewise a brace.

As before, King passed, Thompson dropped a couple of notes upon the little pile in the center of the table, Gentleman Joe quietly saw and raised, Lucky Jackson doing the same thing in turn. King came in, but left it with Mr. Thompson to say whether or no betting should go a notch higher.

"Get rich or go bu'st, is one of the handsomest mottoes I ever run up against on a dark night," quoth that gentleman, keeping his cards jealously screened while counting out a tidy sum in bills. "And it's been a long day since I met a crowd I'd rather drop my good money to. Providing I can't snatch theirs, of course, you understand?"

"Money does my talking," quietly said Gentleman Joe, meeting that raise, then gazing keenly at Lucky Jackson, on whose face was frozen that set smile.

Never a word passed his lips, but his actions spoke clearly enough for all. He met the raise, then smilingly dropped bill after bill upon the growing pile, with just sufficient deliberation to enable his antagonists to keep count of his betting.

Tom King gave a muttering growl as Lucky Jackson finally held his hand, and dropped his cards upon the discard, saying:

"I'm out, gentlemen; divide the pie between you."

"It's mighty rich, but I'm calling for a sight, if I can't raise it another notch," said Mr. Thompson, with a heavy sigh.

"A good example is better followed than crossed, and that makes my call good, gentlemen," said Gentry, in turn.

Thompson gave a short, gratified cry at this, since Gentleman Joe, by following his example, had shut out Lucky Jackson from further betting. And as he faced four queens, he said:

"I never was lucky with the fair sex, but when four of 'em comes at a fellow like this, how can I help wading in to my lips?"

"Mighty foolish if you didn't, pardner," said Gentry, dropping his cards, face up. "I thought ace full on jacks made a very pretty combination, but you've taught me better. Your hand beats me hollow."

"Sorry, but I reckon I've got to call down that smile of yours, Mr. Thompson," said Lucky Jackson, spreading his cards and anticipating the hand which Thompson was

extending toward the pot. "A flush, and—please count the spots, gentlemen."

His cards were all hearts, and ran in sequence from ten to six, thus forming a royal flush. And chuckling softly, his hand dropped upon the goodly pile of money, claiming it as his own—dropped upon the money and staid right there.

CHAPTER II.

A GAME CUT SHORT.

Thought itself could hardly have been swifter than the action of Gentleman Joe, just then, and no sooner had Lucky Jackson placed a claiming hand upon the pot, than there came a flashing of polished steel, a sharp thud, a screech of fierce agony.

The Gilt-Edged Sport had driven a dagger through hand and cash into the hard wood beneath, pinning the gambler fast to the table.

There was an instant scattering among the witnesses, and Gentleman Joe sprang to his feet, kicking the chair away behind him, each hand gripping a cocked revolver as he cried, sharply:

"Steady, all! I'll kill the man who first touches a gun."

One dark muzzle covered Lucky Jackson, while the other stared Tom King full in the face, checking his effort to arise, for there was death gleaming in those steel-gray eyes.

"Crippled—robbed," hoarsely gasped Jackson, shrinking from that muzzle, unable to free his injured hand, and afraid to clutch the weapon with his sound member, lest the movement prove his death-warrant.

"Foul play, men," angrily snarled King. "Will you stand by and see such a foul outrage carried out?"

"Steady, all," repeated Gentry, in still sterner tones.

"I'll kill these two knaves at the first move toward interference from outsiders. There has been foul play, and I'm going to prove it, too. Thompson?"

"Holy—ge-thunder," spluttered that gentleman, breaking the spell which had fallen upon him. "I didn't—I don't—"

"Brace up, and pretend you're a man, if you can't do any better," sharply uttered the Gilt-Edged Sport. "Rip his sleeve up, and, if you don't expose a hold-out with the cards, he ought to have played, I'll pay the full penalty, with never a kick."

There was intense excitement throughout the room, and among the many ejaculations which came, were some breathing danger to the bold sport who was risking his life in the attempt to punish foul play. He caught these, as did Tom King, who angrily cried once more:

"I appeal to you, friends; will you stand by and—"

"They will, or witness your death, Mr. King," sternly interrupted Gentleman Joe, keeping the two knaves covered, and never casting a look around the while. "Let any man chip in, and, though he may kill, he surely can't save. I've got the drop, and even in death I'll make it count a double. Lightning couldn't slay quickly enough to save either King or Jackson."

There are threats, and threats. Not one present but felt fully convinced Gentleman Joe meant every word he uttered just then, and even Thomas King turned paler as he listened. Bold enough where he stood an even show, this calm daring caused his hot blood to grow chill.

"A lie! I never—don't shoot, curse you."

"Stand up to the rack and take your fodder, then, Jackson. And you, pardner, show him up, unless you want all to believe you were playing in cahoots with the brace."

Even then Mr. Thompson hesitated, showing almost as great distaste as either of the other players.

"Show him up, I tell you," sharply added Gentleman Joe, "Must I give you a squint at my lead, then?"

"I hate to do such—all right, then," spluttered Thompson, as the weapon which covered Lucky Jackson took a swift curve toward his own brain.

Grasping the hand which was pinned fast to the table, he ripped up that sleeve, exposing an ingenious hold-out, the delicate springs clasping five minor cards; but before he could do more the lights went out with a startling crash, and instantly all was wildest confusion.

Gentleman Joe dropped quickly to his knees, jerking

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Thompson with him, but not so swiftly that the stranger was cheated out of his just winnings; he tore away the dagger, and clutched the pile of bills, cramming them into his breast, as he ducked low and followed that guiding hand.

None too soon, either.

Tom King knew what was coming, and the same instant he dropped his revolver, exploding, aimed at the space where Gentleman Joe had been, but now was not.

Shouts, oaths, yells of angry fright filled the air. Men rushed blindly back and forth, struggling, striking, shooting at random in that utter darkness, for the most part thinking only of winning clear of the room, but in their mad fright hampering each other most effectually.

"With me, for your life, man!" said Gentleman Joe, forcing Thompson toward the window in the side of the building, his pistols once more in their scabbards, his strong right arm clearing the way with lusty shoves and heavy blows.

The window was reached, and a single blow against the light frame drove sash and all from its fastenings, then Gentleman Joe caught his companion with both hands, heaving him bodily through the opening, to follow after himself the next instant.

Neither man was injured by the fall, and gripping Thompson by an arm as he recovered his balance, Gentry added, hastily:

"Lively, man! They'll come with a rush as soon—to the left."

A pistol was barking at the opening, and the red flame showed the dark visage of Tom King, doing his best to play even for the shame which had been put upon him.

The night was fairly dark, the heavens being partially obscured by drifting clouds, but that was an advantage to one so thoroughly familiar with his surroundings as was the Gilt-Edged Sport.

"You know, I reckon, but—which way're we going?" ventured Mr. Thompson, as they turned a corner.

"Almost any way is good enough, so it takes us out of the wilderness, don't you reckon?" asked Gentleman Joe, with a low, amused laugh. "Listen to the wild beasts growling, will you?"

"I've heard sweeter sounds, though. Why didn't you give me a hint before you stirred up the animals, pardner?"

"Because I wasn't dead sure you didn't belong to the menagerie," came the cool response. "Even yet I'm betwixt and between."

"Yet—you risked right smart, just to save my money?"

"Not exactly, my dear fellow. The money cut no figure in my mind. All I cared for was to expose Lucky Jackson and his master."

"Which you did, to the queen's taste. Well, I raked in the pot, all the same, but I dropped your neat bit of steel in the scuffle, I'm sorry to say."

"What! you got the money?" asked Gentleman Joe, in surprise.

"Every dollar of it; and that's right where I was when the light went out," chucklingly observed Mr. Thompson, then adding, with sudden gravity:

"They're coming this way, sir, and—hadn't we better pick up our hoofs just a weenty mite faster, think?"

"We're in the open, now, and as good as the best," coolly said the Sport, pausing and facing about. "Since they are so hot for a row, wouldn't it be a pity to disappoint them, Mr. Thompson?"

"Have I any say-so?"

"Certainly; why not? Don't be at all bashful, my dear fellow: Which shall it be: run, or fight?"

Mr. Thompson hesitated a single instant, for even a coward dislikes to brand himself as such. And yet, even a brave man might easily have found excuse for prudence in those wild, savage sounds coming from the immediate vicinity of the Oasis just then.

Some at least of those who had been in the gaming-room, when the disturbance broke forth were now anxious to "play even," or all sounds go for naught.

"Then I vote for heels instead of hands," frankly declared the stranger, after that brief pause. "Of course, I don't like to admit that I'm a coward, but—well, I never could shoot for a cent after dark."

"And this would be shooting for dear life," said Gentle-

man Joe, slipping a hand through Mr. Thompson's arm and moving along once more. "If you know anything about those fellows, you surely know that much?"

"All I know I've picked up since the sun set," frankly admitted Thompson. "I never saw either of the gentlemen before to my certain knowledge, and I'm not so mighty sure I care to see either of them again."

"There's only one way to make sure of that: to shake Hardscrabble dust off your feet, instantner."

"By which you mean—just what, pardner?"

"That you'll have to fight or run. Neither King nor Jackson will rest content with the game as it now stands, and while they'll pay closest attention to me, of course, they'll hardly overlook you."

"You advise me to take leg-bail, then, sir?"

"That will be the safest course, no doubt."

The wild uproar near the Oasis now abruptly died away, and both men instinctively faced in that direction. That sudden silence seemed even more ominous than the former outcry, and there was a barely perceptible tremor in the voice of Mr. Thompson, as he muttered:

"Sounds kind o' creepish, don't it, sir? Reckon we'd better be going somewhere, and the quicker the better, I'm thinking."

"It may be better than it feels, though," said Gentleman Joe, but making another abrupt change in their course and walking briskly forward. "Maybe Horace Eagle—city marshal, you understand? Maybe he has called the loud-mouths down in time. I saw him in the room, and was just on the point of calling him in as arbitrator betwixt us, when the lights went out."

"Ugh!" with a shiver. "I never realized the full value of lamp-light, until that darkness came upon us. It gives me the cold chills, just to think of it, then."

"Yet you were cool enough to rake down the pot, it seems," retorted Gentleman Joe, a trace of distrust in his tones. "Don't you think there is such a thing as trying to play it a little too fine, Mr. Thompson?"

"Would I be low-down enough to play it on you, sir, after all you've risked in my behalf?" asked the stranger, in an injured tone.

"Not unless you had a point to make, of course. But let that pass for the present. Where do you prefer going just now?"

"Anywhere, just so I can gain time enough for a brace-up before those fellows call for a settlement," came the prompt reply. "I only struck town this evening. Came in by stage, you know. Haven't even hit on a bunk for the night, but—"

"Then what's the matter with my hotel, the Occidental? Will you go there to my room for the night? It's surely as safe a spot as any other, and then, too, I owe you an explanation."

"I'll freely forgive that debt, unless you are anxious to pay it, dear sir," frankly said Mr. Thompson. "As for the shelter, I'll take that, as freely as it's offered, at least until I can steady my poor nerves and clear my wits a little. Just now, I'm ready to jump and run from my own shadow."

Gentleman Joe made no reply to this assertion, but moved briskly on, approaching the Occidental Hotel from the rear.

He warily passed along the side of the big, barn-like frame structure, making sure none of their enemies were skulking in front, waiting and watching for their arrival, then entering the hotel by the little door at one side of the main entrance.

This brought them directly upon a narrow flight of stairs leading to the second story, which they were thus enabled to gain without their arrival being noticed by the occupants of the office and bar combined.

A lamp was dimly burning at the head of the stairs, and showed Mr. Thompson a long corridor, with doors at brief intervals along either side of the passage.

Gentleman Joe led the way to one of these, which he opened with a key taken from his pocket. They entered a small chamber, and, bidding his guest stand still for a moment, Gentry struck a match and lit an oil-lamp which stood upon the wash-stand near the closely-curtained window at the head of the single bed.

"Take a seat, Mr. Thompson," he said, nodding toward

the one wooden-backed chair which the chamber afforded, at the same time seating himself on the edge of the bed. "Wish I had something better to offer you, but this is bachelor's hall. Safer than the Oasis, though, if not quite as gorgeous."

"I should say as much. Ugh!" with a nervous little shiver, as he glanced around the room. "I strolled forth to see the elephant just to kill time, but 'pears like I woke up the entire menagerie."

"Well, how did you like it far as you got, pardner?"

CHAPTER III.

A WORD OF WARNING.

Mr. Thompson gave an embarrassed shrug, and his hand mechanically drew his coat closer over the belt of arms at his middle.

Gentleman Joe quietly added:

"Nothing personal intended, of course, but you do look like a country parson on the loose, barring your arsenal. Expected to start a revival at McGill's, perhaps?"

Bland of voice and innocent of expression, Gentleman Joe beamed mildly upon his guest, his eyebrows arching as that worthy burst into an amused laugh before saying:

"Country parson is good, decidedly good, my dear fellow. I only wish I might claim the title, but, honestly, I can't. Fact is—ahem! I'm not exactly what I look, you must know."

Was there a false ring to this bit of merriment? So it seemed, for in place of softening, that glimmer of suspicion deepened in the eyes of his host.

"I know you're not, and so I imagine those two fellows did, even before I chipped into their little game."

Mr. Thompson gave a start, his uneasiness seeming to grow stronger at that unwelcome hint. Either he was a most adroit actor, or else he felt actual alarm at the bare thought. An almost hunted look leaped into his eyes, and his voice was husky with strong excitement, as he spoke again:

"You surely can't—what do you mean, man alive?"

"That you never grew the beard you're wearing, for one thing, and while that crop of hair may belong to you, because your good money paid for it, you surely can't show a better title to either of 'em," coolly asserted Gentleman Joe, placidly gazing at his guest, now visibly shrinking away like one who feels his disguise being torn from his person.

He stammered something, he himself could never have told just what, but Gentry lifted a hand with a half-impatient gesture.

"Never mind, Mr. Thompson. Don't strain your conscience or your imagination. I'm not asking an explanation, nor do I care to receive one, particularly."

"But—confound it, sir."

"Wait, if you please," leaning far enough forward to tap his guest lightly upon an arm, then quickly adding:

"I'm making no charges, nor am I asking reasons. For all I care or know to the contrary, you may be a fugitive from justice, who—"

"I'm not that, anyway, sir."

"—feels safer with his natural face put out of sight," coolly continued the Gilt-Edged Sport. "Mark, I say you may be all this, not that you actually are cheating justice. But, even so, you can hardly be as utterly evil as the gang to which those devils in human shape belong."

"You know the gang, then, sir?" quickly, even eagerly asked Mr. Thompson, leaning forward, his brown eyes catching a reddish luster as they fixed upon that handsome face. "You can tell me all about them?"

"I know of them, yes," bowed Gentry, drawing back a little as the other advanced. "As for telling you more about them, that is the very reason I invited you here to my room. But now—well, I hope I'm wrong in thinking that way, but somehow it strikes me you know more concerning those gentry than even I do."

A hot flush tinged that portion of Mr. Thompson's face left uncovered by his beard, for smoothly as Gentleman Joe spoke, the nature of his suspicions could not be mistaken.

"You think I'm playing in cahoots with the gang, don't you, sir?"

"Would I shoot so very wide of the mark in so thinking, Mr. Thompson?"

"You couldn't well shoot more wildly on my honor as a man, sir," came the swift, earnest response, their eyes meeting squarely. "I twisted the truth a bit, first off, for I struck town yesterday in place of this evening, as I told you; but the rest goes as it lays; straight goods, all wool and a yard wide. I met both Lucky Jackson and Tom King for the first time, to my knowledge, there in the Oasis."

"I'm not posing as your father confessor, Mr. Thompson, and if there is any secret connected with your little masquerade, secret let it remain, for all of me. I saw one whom I felt a stranger being most vilely swindled by a brace of crooks, and thought it no more than right to let drop a warning word in time to save at least a portion of your pile."

"A neater trick I never saw turned," declared Mr. Thompson, with a touch of enthusiasm. "When I saw what you had written—where did I stow it away?" cutting himself short, fumbling in his pockets after that warning note.

While thus engaged, he drew forth the mass of blood-stained bills through which Gentleman Joe's dagger had eaten its way after piercing the greedy hand of Lucky Jackson, and a half-sigh, half-laugh came through his lips as he tossed the money upon the bed beside Gentry.

"Not quite so handsome, perhaps, but worth just as much, and a powerful sight more interesting. Yours, Mr. Gentry, unless Jackson cares to contest your claim further."

Gentleman Joe carelessly stirred the crumpled mass with a finger-tip, his lip curling with scorn as he noted the nearly round hole made by his steel, the edges of which were tinged with scarlet. Only the two or three bills which had lain on top were much stained, and they would be little the worse after drying.

"Your claim is better than mine, Mr. Thompson," he said, his gaze returning to that bearded face. "Lucky Jackson put up all the hands, of course, but you had nothing to do with that part of it. I counted his flush out, which left you high-hand."

"But your hand won, for I'd never have raised a whimper when Jackson showed his straight flush, even though nothing had been agreed upon about straights being good."

"They are recognized at the Oasis, and nothing being said to the contrary, the house-rules go, of course. But let that pass for just now; you say you met those fellows for the first time this evening?"

"To the best of my knowledge, yes," said Thompson, but with a slight unsteadiness of tone which Gentleman Joe did not fail to make a note of. "I rather counted on getting skinned, but I thought it was a lesson worth paying a trifle for."

"I'm sorry, if I spoiled sport, but my intentions were of the best," a little more coldly spoke Gentleman Joe. "I saw that those rascals were doubling teams on you, and robbing you right and left, and though I saw you were hardly a novice at the game, I couldn't help dropping in a word of warning."

"Mighty neatly done, too," declared Mr. Thompson, once more making a vain search in his pockets for that particular bit of money. "What could I have done with it, do you reckon?"

"Never mind for the present," with a faint smile, that savored of scorn. "Twas only a five, and not worth hunting after. If you have forgotten the words, so soon—"

"Forgotten them? Never a bit, sir. You said foul play was going on, and told me to ask you to take a hand in."

"Just so," bowed Gentleman Joe. "Thanks for taking the cue so kindly. For the moment I almost believed you and I were old pards, just met after a long and lonesome separation."

Mr. Thompson gave a satisfied chuckle, rubbing his hands together like one fairly well satisfied with his own shrewdness.

"Played it right smart, didn't I? On such short notice, too. Well, if either of the crooks dropped to your little trick, they couldn't find foothold for a solid kick, at any rate."

"Which was precisely what I played for. Such human

wolves are a curse to the country, and do more to keep barbarism afloat than all other evils combined. Hardscrabble will never be a white man's town, until every knave of their caliber is run out, or run up—a tree."

"And these—this man King, for instance?" asked Thompson, his brown eyes once more all aglow with interest which he vainly strove to mask. "You know him? Tell me more about him, please?"

That eagerness bade fair to cheat his hopes, for Gentleman Joe instantly changed his manner, his face growing more set, his voice taking on a sharper, less friendly ring as he abruptly spoke:

"Thanks, but I reckon I've said enough on short acquaintance. This is the pot you raked down, is it?" turning toward the money on the bed.

"Every dollar of it, yes. I don't reckon many bits got away, though it was a blind and a hasty rake. Things looked mighty scarey, and you seemed in such a hurry to levant, that I just took a snatch-grab, and called myself lucky for that much."

Mr. Thompson spoke in a jocular tone, but underneath lay an uneasiness which mere lightness of tone could hardly disguise.

Gentleman Joe made no reply, but rapidly counting out a sum equal to the bets he had made on that last hand, picked up the remainder with his other hand, holding the money toward his guest, saying:

"Take it, sir. I've merely drawn down what I put up, and I hardly think you'll object to my doing that, even though your hand held over mine, on the face of it."

"Object? How could I? I said good-by to each dollar as I put it up, and—that is—I meant to say—"

Mr. Thompson broke down before that keen, cynical gaze, shifting uneasily on his seat, as though it was growing uncomfortably warm.

"Do you know what a totally disinterested person might easily think you were saying, Mr. Thompson? That I, not you, had figured as fat pigeon to be plucked."

"I didn't mean it that way, sir," earnestly declared the other, losing something of his nervousness, real or assumed. "I knew it was a cold hand, but I knew that you had dropped to the racket, just as surely. I felt fairly sure there'd be a row of some description, but I thought it no more than fair to say with you, even though I had to go it blind. And then—well, you saved the cash, and it belongs to you more than to any other one man."

"Take it or leave it, sir, just as you see fit. I've taken my own, and one dollar more than that would blister my fingers. Take it, or throw it out of the window, I say."

His voice grew hard and stern, and Mr. Thompson meekly yielded, so far as picking up the perforated bits of printed paper was concerned.

"Since you put it in that shape, sir, why, I'll give way, but—"

"Enough on that score, if you please, sir. Now, unless you are ready and able to defend your life, I reckon you'd better shake Hardscrabble while the dark lasts."

"Speaker plainer, please, Mr. Gentry."

"Is it necessary? All right; plainer goes, Mr. Thompson. Unless you are a friend to those two rascals, and can see your way clear to smoothing over this little affair in their sight, your life is in danger each minute you spend in this town."

"Both King and Jackson will surely try to make things level. I crippled one side of Lucky, and made his master eat dirt in public. If only for that, they'll come again, red hot for gore, even if it wasn't a motto of the gang to rule or ruin. You were in my company, even if not actually on my side. So—can you read the rest, Mr. Thompson?"

"I almost wish you hand't chipped in, after all, sir."

"Ditto, as far as you are concerned, but not as to the other wolves."

"Meaning I'm one of them, eh?"

"Doesn't it begin to look that way?"

"You wrong me, sir, by entertaining such ugly suspicions."

"If I do consider an apology offered," blandly said the Sport, with a mocking bow. "Then, as an honest man to another gentleman, I say it all over; if you value your life pull out of Hardscrabble before those human wolves

can fairly strike your trail. If you wait until then, I fear you'll never go away living."

"Then you think—"

"Say know, and you'll come closer to the truth, Mr. Thompson. They will surely try to play even, and, when they do come, they'll have more backers than one; the entire gang will come in sober earnest."

"You're a stranger here, according to your own account, and will hardly be blamed for taking leg-bail from such long odds. As for me; well, as I'm too lazy to run, reckon I'll have to fight it out the best way I can."

Instead of making reply in words, William Thompson bowed his head upon his joined hands, his strong form shivering as with an ague-fit, or under some powerful emotion.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRONG MAN'S MOAN.

Gentleman Joe leaned back upon one elbow, a faint smile curling his handsome mustache, as he watched that bowed figure.

Although his emotion seemed genuine, he was not quite ready to alter the opinion he had formed of this stranger since entering that little chamber.

Why should Mr. Thompson exhibit such strong emotion? It could hardly be fear; that weakness might readily be understood, but not such an exhibition as this. He contented himself with waiting and watching, taking mental notes the while, and probably that line of action led to a speedier explanation than would otherwise have come about.

Mr. Thompson gave a long, deep breath, then lifted his head, his hands dropping to his knees where his strong fingers worked nervously the while. His eyes looked reddened, but that was hardly a proof of genuine emotion. His voice was husky and trembled perceptibly, but that also might be counterfeit.

"May I talk plainly with you, sir?" he asked. "Will you listen to my explanation?"

"I'll listen, yes," nodded Gentleman Joe, quietly.

"If you listen, belief will surely follow," declared Thompson, with the faintest of smiles flitting across his face. "I'm weak—very weak, and foolish, as well, I dare say you'll think, but I couldn't help it; I just couldn't, sir."

"Some men are built that way, I dare say. But—are you strong enough to continue, my dear sir? Don't let me put a strain upon your—your conscience, is it?"

Mr. Thompson gave his head a little toss, and his tones were firmer as he spoke again:

"You have the right to sneer, Mr. Gentry, perhaps, but is it exactly generous? If you were born without fear, am I to blame for being—if not exactly a coward, at least not a hero?"

There was a touch of dignity in those words which brought a flush to the face of the Gilt-Edged Sport. He was a gentleman in more than name, and he felt that reproof keenly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, extending a hand in frank apology. "I was wrong to sneer, and now—"

"Say no more, I beg," as their hands met in a gripfar more hearty than any Gentry ever expected to give this stranger whose words and demeanor had seemed so suspicious. "I've often had to blush for my own lack of nerve, but never have I felt it more keenly than this very night, when you, a complete stranger, so nobly risked your life in—"

"Drop it, I beg, pardner," interposed Gentleman Joe. "I was wrong, but I have made amends by admitting as much. Don't try to rub it in any deeper, please."

Their hands parted, and once more Thompson hid his face in his hands. Once again his powerful frame was agitated, but now, as before, he fought back his emotions, and again facing the Sport, he spoke in clearer, more rapid tones:

"You were right when you accused me of wearing a disguise, Mr. Gentry, but I hope it's not so readily penetrated by all men? If so, I'm sorry I attempted it. And yet—in such a wild, lawless place as this town seems to be, there

must be others who try to hide their real faces under a mask?"

"Not so many as there should be, perhaps," said Gentry, quietly.

"Well, I've gone too far now to draw back, even if I wished to do so, which I certainly do not. I came here, hoping against hope, and until that faint hope is confirmed or dissipated, I'll play my part as I planned it, first off.

"I came here, sir, hoping to find one whose loss had darkened my life and ruined all my future. One who—I can't tell it all, sir, though I need the sympathy of an honest man—need it more than a starving wretch longs for food to keep him from perishing."

His voice choked, and his head bowed once more. Gentleman Joe said nothing, keenly watching this stranger the while.

His emotion certainly seemed genuine, but—was it more than cunning acting?

"For three short years I was happy—too happy, it seemed," resumed Thompson, in tones that were far from steady or strong. "I married the one woman this world held for me. I loved her, more passionately than words can tell, and she returned that love. I know she did. I know she was not false—then.

"I was too happy for such a life to last, it seems. I was often absent from home, for I traveled for a wholesale house, and my route covered three States. I was at home only a few days in each month, but those days—ah, they seemed happy enough, then, they seem like a foretaste of heaven, now!

"I never so much as dreamed of anything going wrong at home. True, no children came to bless our union, but Martha—my wife, sir—appeared both happy and contented. But—I learned it all when too late.

"We had been married just three short years, as I said, and I hurried my trip so we might spend that third anniversary together, just as we had spent the others. I reached home the night before—to find all dark, all deserted.

"On the bed, which we had occupied together, was pinned a brief note; I read it, but I could not understand, much less believe. Yet it was so short, so simple, so devilishly cruel; only the words 'Good-by, Willy. I've gone with a handsomer man.'"

Was it acting? Could any man so adroitly counterfeit emotion so intense as this?

Gentleman Joe felt his doubts begin to fade away, but he wisely withheld judgment for the time being. And as he said nothing, Thompson once more gained the victory for which he was fighting, and in colder, even tones resumed his story:

"The next few days were like a horrible nightmare to me, and not even yet can I say just what my actions were, though five long, weary years have crept slowly by since that bitter black night.

"The neighbors told me much; and some of them even seemed to feel sorry for my sufferings, too," with a short, hard laugh. "They told me that for more than a year past, my wife had had a visitor whom none of the neighbors knew, or cared to know, as they took pains to add. And no doubt that stranger was the person whom Martha meant in her cruel note.

"Well, I did all I knew how to trace them out. I sold my property, and converted everything into cash. I spent money very freely, hiring detectives by the dozen, and following every clew, no matter how vague or how misleading. But with all my efforts, I learned nothing more than those few mocking words which I found on my return to my ruined home.

"I am not much wiser to this day, although I have picked up a few stray facts which appear to point toward one of two men—Thomas King, and his twin brother, Asa."

"With one of whom you were playing cards this evening," ejaculated Gentleman Joe, in genuine surprise. "If you thought—"

"It was only thinking, not proof, bear in mind, Mr. Gentry," quickly interrupted Thompson, a hot flush coming into his face under that half-contemptuous gaze. "I hoped to settle my doubts, one way or the other, and as

the best chance for getting at the truth, I played innocent, and only too willingly fell into the trap which I felt sure was being laid for me.

"I felt perfectly secure in my disguise; for that matter, even had the villain known me intimately in those days, I doubt if he could have recognized my face, changed as grief and thirst for vengeance has altered me for the worse."

"What could you hope to gain from letting those rascals swindle you out of your money, though?"

"The good-will and acquaintance of King, for one thing, by proving a cheerful loser," came the prompt reply. "If really my man, I knew he had not recognized me; how could he, when at best he knew me only from my picture, or from what my—from what she told him? But now—you ruined that hope, by leading up to this unfortunate squabble."

"I'm sorry, if matters are as you state them, Mr. Thompson, but I certainly thought I was acting all for the best. I saw a stranger being swindled by two of the vilest wretches who ever cursed this footstool. And so seeing, I thought it time to interfere."

"I'm not blaming you, sir, only—I wish you hadn't, all the same."

Even yet Gentleman Joe was not entirely satisfied that this man was telling the truth, or even part of the truth. And he instantly touched on one of the points to which his doubts still hung.

"You say you were letting them cheat you for a purpose? You knew that foul play was going on, then?"

"Yes. They were adroit enough to blind some eyes, but not mine. I knew I was being robbed, but I saw a possible reward ahead, and was more than content to let it be so."

"Then why did you jump at my hint so swiftly?"

"Because I feared just what happened later—a row," came the instant response. "From your first word, I knew both King and Jackson not only disliked, but actually feared you, for some reason which I had not time to even guess at. And so I asked you to join us, trusting that with you in the game, they would play too squarely for a row to break forth."

"Which was where you made a wide mistake, pardner," with a low, mellow laugh. "They hate me worse than Satan hates holy water, and only for a stray chance to lay me out cold, they never would have touched a card after your invitation to me."

"If I'd only known as much," sighed Thompson, his head drooping, but lifting it the next instant with the eager question:

"But you—can't you tell me something, sir? You know all about these twin brothers? They are—has either of them a woman with them here?"

"There is a woman, yes," slowly replied Gentleman Joe; "but I hardly think she can be the one you are interested in. She passes for the wife of Asa King, and forms an important item in the Royal Flush, as the main gang is locally known."

"Can you describe her? Is she—tell me more, man!" a touch of fierce emotion coming into his tones.

"I wish I might for your sake, sir," said Gentry, in kindlier tones, for his doubts were slowly fading away before that superb acting, if acting it really was.

"Why can't you, then?"

"Because I don't know anything to tell more than I have already given you. Mrs. Asa King, if that is her legal title, keeps herself very secluded so far as the public knows. She hardly ever ventures upon the streets, at least in daylight, but when she does, her face is thickly veiled, and one or more of the gang always bears her company, as though on purpose to bluff off any inquisitive person."

"Why so much caution, unless she is afraid of being recognized by—merciful heavens! Can it be that I have at last found her? Have I at last run down—and now—"

His voice choked and emotion apparently overcame him. He bowed his head, hiding it as before, his strong frame shivering as with intense emotions. Stifled sobs came up in his throat, only choked back by the remnant of a well-nigh shattered will.

Only for those earlier suspicions, Gentleman Joe would have yielded him earnest sympathy, even if he could give

nothing better. But—was it genuine? Was it not all a piece of audacious acting, the better to blind his eyes?

Strange as it may appear, Gentry felt more than half-convinced that this stranger was playing a part, the better to bring about the oft-hinted purpose of the Royal Flush: to kill, disgrace, or banish the once Bonanza King from Hardscrabble.

He could offer no actual reasons for this suspicion, yet it was none the less powerful, though gradually wearing away before that heart-broken manner, that simply told a tale of great wrong and bitter grief.

Once again William Thompson conquered his emotions, and lifting his head was about to speak, when a loud, fierce yell burst forth from the street below, followed almost instantly by the rapid explosion of a gun or revolver—the last, almost surely, since other shots followed in rapid succession, each bullet splintering the glass of the curtained window near which the two men were sitting, passing over their heads and striking ceiling or partition beyond.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROYAL FLUSH.

"Wake up snakes, an' git a move on. Rack out o' thar, Ebenezer, fer it's yer boss is a-callin'. Come out o' yer hole, fer the day o' jedgment is a-dawnin', an' right hyar's ole Gabe a-tootin' of his horn—'way, up loud, too."

Punctuated with yells and oaths and exploding powder came these sentences through the night, and if Gentleman Joe had for a single instant misinterpreted that sudden assault, that voice would have set him aright.

Mr. Thompson ducked his head quickly as the glass began to spit and crinkle, a half-inch circle turning to powder as each bullet came through the curtain, but he drew a gun and turned toward the danger-threatening quarter with a cool readiness hardly to be expected in one who had so recently admitted his lack of nerve.

He even moved a bit nearer the window, as though he would tear aside the curtain for shot or glance at the reckless marksman, but before he could do more, Gentleman Joe caught an arm and held him back.

"Go easy, pardner," he said, in warning. "Better the glass than your corporosity, don't you reckon?"

"But—great heavens, man!" spluttered Mr. Thompson, ducking his head once more as a bullet came spat-zip through glass and curtain, then expending its force upon the ceiling near the partition wall.

"That hails from 'below, not above, pardner," lightly chuckled the Gild-Edged Sport, his face turned toward the door, rather than the window.

"I'm a wolf. I'm a howler right from Yelpville. I kin chaw my weight in—"

That sentence was left unfinished, or, if completed, came in tones so much lower as to fail to reach the ears of the two men in that little chamber. But other sounds took their place, and as angry shouts and calls broke forth from the front of the hotel, Gentleman Joe spoke again:

"It's all right now I reckon, and you can rear your proud crest aloft without much fear of catching lead. The big idiot has roused mine host and his guests, and he'll either slink away in the dark, or pay the penalty."

"Then you know—what does it all mean, anyway?"

"That part's plain enough," with a careless nod of his head in the direction of the riddled window. "Only Dan Diamond can use Daniel's melodious fog-horn, and he's a worthless henchman to an unworthy chief. He can make noise enough, and explode a cap with the next fellow, so long as he has a target which fails to shoot back, but—"

Gentleman Joe was talking after a rather curious fashion, letting his tongue run on as though he neither knew nor cared much what words came first. And all the while his eyes were fixed upon the door, and while his head was slightly bent as though in keen listening, one hand rested upon a pistol-butt, ready to draw and shoot on the instant.

A sound came from the corridor, and instantly his revolver was covering the door, finger on trigger. But then, as the sounds died away, he who made them evidently rushing rapidly down the stairs, the weapon was lowered, and its owner gave a soft, mellow chuckle as he took note

of the amazed, half-bewildered, expression worn by the face of Mr. Thompson.

"Beginning to catch light through the mill-stone, pardner?" he asked, dryly, resuming his former position on the side of the bed.

"Good heavens, sir! You surely don't mean—do you, though?"

"Well, you heard that gentle invitation to emerge, didn't you? And he who uttered it, sent his cards in through my lighted window, didn't he? And only a crazy loon would even dream of accepting that invitation by way of the window, would he? Well, there you have it, pardner."

"Then you really think they put up the job? You think they're on the lookout for you, and would shoot at sight, if you left this room?"

"Thinking is not proof positive, of course, Mr. Thompson, but I'm not at all anxious to put it to the test, for the present, at least."

"But—I can't understand it," declared Mr. Thompson, with an uneasy glance from door to window, then to the calm face of his host. "If they're such wicked desperadoes, and you know they're playing for your life, why don't you—why not do something, man alive?"

"I'm waiting, and if you think that isn't doing something, then you never tried it on, where a single misstep means life or death," coldly retorted the Gilt-Edged Sport, for the first time betraying a touch of irritation.

For a few moments neither man spoke, both listening as they waited.

No further shots came from the street below, and while voices were occasionally heard, none of them resembled that which had so fiercely rung forth a challenge to the man who held forth back of that one lighted window.

"I reckon the music is over for the time being," at length said Gentleman Joe, slipping his gun back into its case, but still facing the locked door. "Big Casino has made his slink, and the gentlemen, his bit of a jamboree disturbed, are likewise simmering down. The next thing on the programme will be something else."

"Then you think 'twas all part of a scheme to play even?" asked Mr. Thompson, with a show of nervousness in voice and manner.

"I did think so, right or wrong, pardner, but I'm not quite so certain, now. If the Royal Flush were moving as a unit, they'd hardly be bluffed off so easily."

"The Royal Flush?" echoed Thompson, with a show of curiosity.

"Haven't you heard of it before now?"

"You don't mean—of course, Lucky Jackson held one this evening, but I hardly think you can mean that?" hesitated the stranger.

"Hardly that," admitted Gentleman Joe, with a passing smile. "Only two of the cards were present, just then—King and Knave. You've heard a word or two from the lowest member of the Flush, however, for Big Casino is that pretty little ten-spot."

"Oh, the gang, as you called them?" interjected Thompson, light breaking upon his befogged wits.

"Of course. They call themselves a Royal Flush, and as such they are best known in camp. And, to give them simple dues, they've lived up to the title so far. How much longer their good luck will hold out depends on—well, on that luck's lasting, of course."

Gentleman Joe smiled, as he gave his guest a slight bow, and once more a hot flush came into that heavily-bearded face. Whatever his lacking qualities might be, Mr. Thompson was no dullard, and he could hardly mistake the full meaning of that abrupt change of both voice and manner.

"You're doubting my honesty still, I see, Mr. Gentry, but if I haven't convinced you of my squareness already, there's little use in trying it further. Still, if you'd kindly tell me more about this particular gang, as you term them—"

"Why not?" coolly asked Gentleman Joe, as Mr. Thompson hesitated in his speech. "Of course, you wouldn't be so low down as to repeat what was told you in confidence, but granting you were such a sneak, what matter? The gang is more than welcome to my honest

opinion, and if any other lips carry them my sentiments, 'twill spare a bit of breath on my part."

"I swear I'll never tell a word which—"

"Swear not, brother, lest ye be cursed at in turn," cut in the Gilt-Edged Sport, with mock solemnity. "As for the rest, what little I can tell, you could pick up in a very few minutes on the streets of the first citizen you chanced to run up against—that is, the Royal Flush is an undeniable fact, and while it is a paying institution from their standpoint, it certainly is neither a credit nor a shining light to Hardscrabble or the country surrounding us."

"And King belongs to the gang, you say?"

"Both of them, yes. Asa leads, either because he is the biggest rascal of the two, or because his chums call him Ace for short. Thomas K. is the King, by the same token, and Lucky Jackson figures as the Knave, simply through lopping off his head and his tail. Then comes the ten-spot, which is supplied by Big Casino, or Dan Diamond, as his parents probably intended he should be called."

"In his own way, Daniel cuts a pretty extensive figure, and no doubt a little more than pays for his keep. He's a hulking big fellow, standing three or four inches over the six-foot mark, and built according. He can howl louder, blow longer, drink deeper, and curse harder, than any other two-legged brute in this section. As for his good qualities—well, there you've got me, pardner."

"Maybe he's got some. I've heard people say that no mortal is entirely devoid of such. But, if that's gospel, then Big Casino can give a setting-turkey points on hiding what isn't wanted found by the owner."

Mr. Thompson listened with undisguised interest to this terse explanation, but as Gentleman Joe came to an end, he eagerly asked:

"You've named four, sir, but—where's the queen?"

"I was telling what I knew, not what I merely surmised, stranger."

"But, surely you can tell me something more concerning her? Anything—everything. What you might pass over as meaningless, to me may mean much—very much. If one of the Kings should really be my man, why not—can that woman be my—she I'm hunting for all these weary years?"

"I can tell you precious little more of my own knowledge, sir," the Sport said, gravely. "I know there is such a woman, and I know that she is called Queen, or Queen Esther, by her associates. I know that she is tall, of a fine figure, and moves like a woman still young and in the best of bodily health."

"So much my eyes have told me, but—well, since you seem so bent on getting at the bottom facts, I'll give you what a friend in town gave me—further word that Queen Esther is a brunette, with hair, eyes, complexion, and carriage of a Mexican or Spanish lady."

Those eager eyes sunk, and Mr. Thompson heaved a deep sigh, as he slowly shook his head, then muttered:

"Not mine—not her! Martha was light, almost a blonde, and while tall, was almost frail in build. And I thought—I hoped—"

Once again he bowed his head and buried his face in joined palms, half-stifled sobs shaking his powerful frame. And once more, Gentleman Joe watched him in silence, a faint smile curling his mobile lips the while.

The disturbance outside had died away. Big Casino, if he had been the one to howl forth that reckless challenge, had passed into temporary oblivion, and finding no one on whom to wreak their indignation, mine host and his guests had returned to the bar.

No sound came from the hall without, and though one hand rested conveniently near his gun, Gentleman Joe hardly looked for an attack from that quarter, after so many minutes had crept by.

Presently Mr. Thompson choked back his emotion, and once more lifted his head, to encounter that cool, half-quizzical gaze.

This time he showed no signs of flinching, and something akin to a smile answered that which curved the Sports' lips.

"There's no chance for a mistake, you think, sir?" he asked. "My wife was a beauty, both in face and figure, but she was not dark enough to be called a brunette, and certainly could not well be mistaken for a Spanish lady."

Still, I hate to give up this hope faint though it's been, at the very best."

"Needs must, when a certain personage cracks the whip, pardner," the adventurer said, lightly. "Better luck next time, perhaps. And now, since you're convinced Queen Esther cannot possibly be your lost one, don't you reckon the word of advice I let drop a few minutes back is well worth recalling?"

"Meaning my taking flight?"

"Don't be so painfully candid, my dear sir. Why not say beating a masterly retreat?"

"It amounts to the same thing in the end, and your repeating that advice proves you consider me a coward."

"Not unless you really want to have it just so, my dear sir," Gentleman Joe added, with a suave smile and neat little bow. "Still, I really think you had better go farther and fare better, for if you stay in Hardscrabble after what's happened this evening, you'll certainly fare much worse."

"And leave you alone to stand the consequences?" almost fiercely ejaculated Mr. Thompson, springing to his feet. "I may be a bit of a coward when it comes to wild shooting, sir, but I'm not quite that bad. You brought on this trouble through pity for me, a stranger, and I'll see you safely through it, or lose my life while trying."

CHAPTER VI.

LUCKY JACKSON'S DEFENSE.

Although both desperadoes prepared for trouble when Gentleman Joe came into that game, neither of the pair were prepared for the precise turn affairs took, when Lucky Jackson claimed that valuable pot.

Thought itself was hardly more swift than were the movements of the Gilt-Edged Sport, and Jackson's hand was pinned fast to the table, while a cocked revolver stared each full in the face, before Tom King could drop a hand to his own weapons.

It was a terribly bitter pill for him to swallow, administered as it was by the hand of a man whom he had openly sworn should flee or fare worse; but what better could he do?

His slightest attempt at resistance would surely invite a death-shot, and those steely eyes spoke even more plainly than did their owner's tongue.

But, thanks to his position, Tom King could see what was hidden from the eyes of Gentleman Joe, and he was fully prepared for action when the lights went out with a crash, that deft stroke coming from a hand friendly to the Royal Flush.

He flung himself backward, drawing and shooting at the same instant of time, but even as his weapon exploded he knew his lead had failed to hit his mark.

He could not save himself from a heavy fall, but quickly rallied, jumping past the table in mad quest of his hated enemy, guided toward the window by the red glare of an exploding pistol.

Thanks to the confusion and mad rushing, Tom King failed to gain that avenue of escape before the two men had made the best possible use of it, and though he emptied his gun through the window, it was but little better than shooting at random. He caught but a single glimpse of Gentleman Joe and the stranger, and that was lost before he could catch even the semblance of an aim.

He leaped through the window, and sprang away in hot pursuit, but that first glimpse was likewise the last—thanks to the abrupt change, of course made by Gentleman Joe, his desperate hope was foiled.

Meanwhile the darkened room was speedily cleared, a few escaping by way of the window, but the majority crowding under the curtained arch-way which separated the gambling hall from the bar, from which a light was hastily brought by the armed proprietor and his aids.

A few shots were discharged in the mad confusion, but, strange to say, no person was killed, or even seriously injured. A few bruises were received, and many a man scared most thoroughly, but the only one who left a trail of blood behind him was Lucky Jackson, the unlucky.

When Mr. Thompson jerked that biting steel away, in order to secure the little stack of bank-notes, Jackson dropped to the floor, fully expecting a shot from Gentle-

man Joe's pistols, and before he could fairly rally from that sudden terror, the room was clearing, and he almost mechanically joined in that frantic rush for the outer air.

He was in front of the Oasis, cursing, raging, one hand streaming blood, the other gripping a gun, as he glared around in quest of the man who had partially disabled him, when Tom King came back from his fruitless quest, knowing that Gentleman Joe would not be found, unless he himself so desired.

"Simmer down, you howling idiot," King savagely growled, catching his mate by an arm and pushing him farther away from the interested gathering. "Do you want to set up as a mark for that devil?"

"Where is he? Show him to me just once, and I'll—here I am, you cur of a Gentry. Show up, if you're anything like a man."

King clapped a harsh hand over the infuriated fellow's lips, and as a big fellow rushed toward them, he said, sharply:

"Catch hold, Casino, and help me get—will you button up, Jack?"

"Crippled—crippled for life," his voice growing husky, as he held up his hand, shaking the red drops away in a little shower. "But I've got one good hand left, and I'll—"

"Of course you will, but not right now," interposed King, as a group of friends surrounded them. "He's run away, so mighty fast even I couldn't catch the cur up. It's waiting a bit, but only waiting, pard."

Motioning Big Casino to fasten upon that sound arm, Tom King wound a handkerchief tightly around the injured hand, for the wound was bleeding fast, and he feared an important artery had been severed.

This done, he bade Diamond hunt up a doctor, and send him to the house toward which he now hurried the wounded gambler.

This building stood near the outskirts of Hardscrabble, and was a bit above the average, from a mining-camp standpoint. It was of two stories, neatly painted, with a broad piazza running along the front.

A substantial board fence inclosed the grounds, and, coming to the gate, Tom King paused, briefly thanking the friends who had borne them company so far, then adding:

"I reckon we'll not trouble you further this evening, gentlemen, so good night to you, one and all."

Entering the grounds, he closed the gate, then hurried his wounded mate up to the house, giving a clear, sharp whistle as he mounted the few broad steps.

Almost instantly the front door swung partly open, though no one was visible by the dim light thus revealed, and when the two men crossed the threshold the door closed, a fair but strong hand deftly turning the key in the lock an instant later.

"Where's Ace, Queen?" gruffly demanded King, confronting the tall, finely formed woman who had given them admittance.

"Up town, somewhere, of course. Hurt, Lucky?"

"Crippled. Crippled by that cursed Gentry, but I'll—"

"Shut up, man. Haven't you played the fool enough for one night? Get water and rags, Queenie, for I reckon the doctor'll be along in a few minutes, and—"

"Then the doctor may go back the same way he comes," curtly interrupted the woman, deftly untwisting that rude bandage, and giving the injured hand a half-contemptuous glance. "For a scratch like this? I know another who might wear those four letters as a cap, Tom King, and have no grounds for grumbling at the fit."

"Then you don't reckon—"

"This way, Lucky," leading the gambler into a room to the left of the hall. "I'm doctor enough to patch up a little scratch like this, and any man with a grain of common sense in his composition would have known as much without telling. Tom!"

King gave a surly growl by way of response, but Queen cared little for his moods, and bade him fetch a basin of water. She took complete charge of the case, and falling to work with a cool skill which was not long in convincing even Jackson that his hurt was far less serious than he had at first believed.

"The idea of rushing for a doctor," the woman repeated,

her red lip curling in magnificent scorn as she bathed the wound, then wound it about with neatly placed bandages. "No bones broken, and a clean cut; I could make a worse one with my hair-pin."

The hurt was almost cared for, when the sound of voices came to their ears, and, recognizing one of them, Tom King opened the front door, to send the doctor back with a few words of explanation. It had been all a mistake, and the patient was already sufficiently cared for. But he added to Big Casino:

"If you meet up with Ace, Dan, just tell him to drop over this way for a bit, will you?"

Even that proved to be an unnecessary precaution, for in less than five more minutes the peculiar signal sacred to the chief of the Flush came to their ears, and Asa King strode into the building, his face much darker than usual, his eyes glowing with a dangerous light, from which the wounded gambler shrunk as he would never have flinched before any other living mortal.

"What's all this row about, I'd like to know?" came the harsh demand. "You've been playing the fool again, Jackson?"

"Touch lightly, Asa," softly murmured the Queen, an arm stealing over his shoulder and lovingly clasping his neck, her red lips daintily touching his bearded cheek the while. "Don't rub it in deary, until you've made sure poor Jack really deserves censure."

The change was startling, not alone in that proud, almost stern woman, but in the man whom she was caressing as well. Their eyes met, and while the glow in his black orbs was hardly less intense, its nature was entirely changed.

No one who might have seen that mutual gaze, could for an instant doubt the sincerity of their love for each other.

Asa King led his queen to an easy-chair, then dropped into another himself. His face was still stern, but that was his ordinary expression, and all present knew that the worst had passed by.

He briefly explained how he had caught an inkling of the row, and learning that one of the couple had been cut, had hastened home without further delay.

"Now, just what brought it about? And how did you come to let that fellow down you both?"

Tom King rather sulkily explained what led up to the disturbance. He declared that the two, stranger and Gentleman Joe, were surely playing in together from start to finish, for Thompson, as he called himself, was surely in disguise, yet recognition had been instantaneous when the Gilt-Edged Sport chipped in.

"You're only half-right, Tom," declared Lucky Jackson, now more nearly his usual self, since his worst fears concerning his hand were set at rest. "Thompson wore a false beard for sure, but he was fairly scared when Gentleman Joe came in—I saw it in his eyes, I tell you, man."

"If your wits were so mighty keen, why didn't you steer clear of such a nasty row?" sternly demanded Asa King. "Or, if you had to cheat, why didn't you make it count for our side, not his—curse him."

"The trick was done neatly enough, I'll say so much for Lucky," put in Tom King. "I was watching with both eyes, but I couldn't catch anything wrong, and only suspected as much when the bills began to drop down in the middle. Then—we, I reckon Gentry was looking for just such an opening for a blow, and took his chances on being right as to the hold-out."

"You knew he was a devil, why did you tempt him without first making sure of your game?"

"That's all easy enough to say, chief, now the thing is over" coolly retorted Jackson. "I banked on my good luck. I needed the cash, and when I saw both men were in a betting humor, I took the chances. I knew there was a possibility of a row, of course, but Gentry was already cocked and primed for one, and if it should come, I intended settling all accounts by laying him out, too cold to skin."

"That's all right, and, if you'd kept your meaning, I'd be the last man on earth to give a kick over it. But—you didn't. Why not?"

"Because the devil came too mighty sudden," admitted the gambler, with a wry grimace as he gently touched his

wounded hand. "Tom can tell you something about that, if he sees fit."

"Right, too," admitted the twin, with reluctant frankness. "I was expecting a kick, but I looked for a word or two to set it in motion."

"From Gentleman Joe?" sneeringly ejaculated his brother. "I thought you knew him better, Tom. He's chain-lightning from all accounts, and since a row was brewing, you'd never ought to have given him a chance for a blow, first or last."

"That's all right, and mighty easy spoken," growled Jackson, his broad brows gathering under a sharp twinge of pain. "But chain-lightning don't begin to touch the truth this trip. Before I even knew it was coming, that devil had me pinned fast to the table, with one gun rubbing my nose, while Tom had to take a sniff of the same sort of bitter medicine."

Asa King leaned back in his chair, utter disgust written upon his sternly handsome countenance, his fiery gaze flitting from one face to the other, then back again.

Lucky Jackson wore a sullenly defiant scowl, but Tom King flushed angrily before that scornful look, and a dangerous retort was rising in his throat when Queen interposed.

"No harsh words among brothers, gentlemen, I beg of you. If Gentleman Joe has taken this trick, what's the matter with our playing even, and just a little more? Why, if I may say it, I'll go bail——"

The rapid reports of fire-arms came to their ears from a distance, and Asa King sprang from his seat, crying:

"Big Casino's got him for any odds you like."

CHAPTER VII.

MR. THOMPSON'S FLAG OF TRUCE.

Catching up his hat, and giving a mechanical touch to his belt of arms, Asa King sprang to the front door, through which he hurried, with Tom King faithfully imitating his movements, neither one paying heed to the warning words so hastily uttered by Queen Esther.

So rapidly did they move, that the twin brothers were fairly outside the building before the last shot came, and the echo of this gave them the direction.

"At or near the Occidental," grimly uttered Ace, pausing barely long enough to make sure of that point. "Dollars to cents Dan's got the dandy, first of all."

"It's Dan's gun for sure," admitted Tom King, but with hardly as great enthusiasm as his brother betrayed; "but I wouldn't crow—now what?"

Both men came to an abrupt halt, staring ahead as though they could make their eyes lend aid to their sense of hearing. A loud, coarse voice was lifted upon the night, and though they failed to catch each word exactly, they knew it was Big Casino shouting forth defiance to their mutual enemy, Gentleman Joe, the Gilt-Edged Sport.

"Got them, not him, I'd say," uttered Tom, in a tone of oddly mingled disgust and triumph.

"Is the big fool gone crazy, that he howls——"

"Taking pattern after his betters, I reckon," snapped Ace at the same time moving onward. "Follys' catching, it seems, but maybe Dan'll draw the badger in time for us to take a whack at him. If he should, make sure work of it this time, old fellow."

Now, that they had fairly caught the right cue, the twins cut no more time to waste, and without exposing themselves more than they could help, took up a position from whence they could command a fair view of the hotel front, as well as both sides, their weapons ready for use in case Gentleman Joe should be drawn from his refuge by that coarse challenge.

A guarded whistle caught Diamond's ears, and gave him notice backers were at hand, just as the startled occupants of the hotel office came flocking forth, pistols in hand; but as neither of the foremost figures was Gentleman Joe, the human colossus prudently backed away in the gloom, gaining the side of his master without being discovered by any of those nearer the lights.

"Simmer, and wait on us," grimly muttered Ace. "Never a yelp nor a bark, unless Gentry shows up. Then—down him for keeps."

The sudden tumult had stirred up a goodly portion of

the town by this time, and as excited men came flocking toward that quarter, the three desperadoes shrunk still deeper into the darkness, their hopes of killing Gentleman Joe fading in proportion as the crowd gathered.

Many of those who came there, drawn by a morbid curiosity, were friendly to the Royal Flush, but even fierce Ace King knew that they would hardly dare uphold a bare-faced assassination on his part, and, as Gentleman Joe still lay perdu, he crept along to where Tom King was on guard, and bade him come away.

"Luck's flatly against us this night, and we'll do only harm by staying here longer."

"Too smart for others besides Lucky and Tom, eh?" maliciously asked King, unable to withhold that fling, risky though he knew the indulgence must be.

"A fool touched off the match, both times, but I tried to turn it to good, at least. You, Dan."

"I'm hearin' to ye, boss," meekly enough came the answer.

"Clap a stopper on, and if any one lets drop a hint that you've been cutting frills, laugh it off the best you know how. One fizzle of a night is enough for the Flush to stagger up under."

As seen, that reckless bluff failed to draw Gentleman Joe from his room, and the brief excitement died away. The general belief, as outwardly expressed at least, seemed to be that some drunken miner had expended his superfluous steam after that rude fashion, and never a hint was given at which the stern, ready-handed twins could take offense.

On the slender chance of Gentleman Joe showing up in public, the brothers moved from point to point, taking in the Oasis in their round, asking no questions, making no threats, yet plainly on the war-path.

Even those who liked them least, treated them respectfully, for each one of the twins had made his record in Hardscrabble, besides bringing a sterner one with them to that camp.

Having given up all hope of catching the Gilt-Edged Sport "on the wing" that night, the brothers were about turning toward home, when Tom King gave a sharp ejaculation of mingled surprise and anger as a man met them face to face at the door of the saloon they were just leaving.

"Flag o' truce, gentlemen," quickly cried this personage, holding up his empty hands, palms to the front. "I'm all for peace, if you'll only let it be that way."

"What sort o' game is this, anyway?" sternly asked King, hand gripping pistol-butt, but letting the gun linger half-drawn.

"No game at all, sir, but wanting to pay for one," promptly answered Mr. Thompson, still careful to keep his empty hands a prominent feature.

"I owe one of you some money, and I've been hunting to pay it ever since. Now—hope I may die, if I can tell t'other from which."

"Who are you, sir?" coldly demanded Ace King, his empty hand signing back the few persons who chanced to be in the saloon at that moment. "Don't trample on our heels, gentlemen, or somebody'll catch a tumble."

"Thompson, William Thompson, with a p, to avoid all mistakes in spelling, sir," bowed the stranger, smiling as blandly as could be expected under the circumstances.

"The fellow I told you about, brother," supplemented Tom King, then adding: "You've come back to finish that little racket, I dare say?"

"I've come to beg pardon for taking an involuntary part in it," the stranger hastened to amend, at the same time giving a covert wink and sign, both concealed from the curious if silent witnesses beyond. "'Twas all over before I even dreamed of its coming, and—I've been hunting for the real winner, ever since I shook—ahem."

Tom King gave a sign in turn, and Mr. Thompson cut himself short with a fairly natural cough. A nod of the head sent him to the right about, and he obediently marched away through the night before the twins, until a gruff word brought him to a halt.

"Steady, stranger. Just keep your station, please, until we say mog along, or lie down."

"Play me white as I'm trying to play you, gentlemen,

and I'll ask no better treatment," quietly said Mr. Thompson, obeying that order.

The brothers drew a few steps away, consulting in swift whispers, but all the time keeping close watch upon this enigmatical stranger. Their guns were drawn, ready for instant play, but though they prolonged his suspense on purpose, Mr. Thompson gave them no excuse for firing a shot, or striking a blow.

Then Tom King coldly asked:

"What sort of game is this you're trying to play on us, Thompson?"

"None on you, sir, but most any sort to down Gentleman Joe."

"That's easy said, but——"

"Give me half a show, sir, and I'll prove my words," eagerly cut in the stranger. "If I can't explain everything that——"

"All right, we'll give you just that show," grimly interrupted Ace, stepping forward and passing a hand through one of Mr. Thompson's arms. "Hitch on, Tom, and we'll be moving. And you, stranger, walk straight to line, or I'll blow you through."

"I'll lead without spurring, gentlemen, and never kick against anything like half a fair shake, only——"

"Save your breath for the right time and place, Mr. Thompson."

This reception was hardly what the stranger calculated upon, but even if he had felt so inclined, resistance was out of the question, now. Tom King had taken his other arm, and, like twin policemen, they were escorting him toward the not distant hills, lying north of town.

He must have known they were both desperate men, used to desperate measures, and that neither one of the pair would stop for a second thought before sending a bullet crashig through his brain or his heart, in case such a course might seem advisable; yet Mr. Thompson bore them company without word or act of distaste.

Neither twin spoke again, until they were fairly clear of town, at a secluded point where there was little fear of eavesdropping or observation. Then, coming to a halt and drawing back a pace, taking positions where they fully commanded the stranger, the question was put:

"Now, explain yourself, Mr. Thompson, and steer clear of lies while making the effort, too, if you're not eager to commit suicide," sternly spoke Ace King, a pistol showing in his right hand.

"Did you ever hear tell of a man named Dick Turner?"

"Devil Dick!" ejaculated Tom King, in undisguised surprise, but his brother showed greater control, curtly speaking:

"Yes. Gentleman Joe killed him last year down Silver Gulch way."

"Or caused his death, to be precise," amended Mr. Thompson, then adding in less even tones: "Well, Dick was my brother, and I've come to Hardscrabble on purpose to pay off that old score."

"Bah! that's a lie on the very face of it," harshly cut in Tom King, with a gesture of angry disgust, which caused Mr. Thompson to lift an empty hand in appeal, as he almost mildly asked:

"May I ask your full meaning, dear sir?"

"Both eyes open, Ace. And you, my glib-tongue, match words to deeds, if you can. I say you're trying to lie, for Gentleman Joe killed Devil Dick, and instead of calling him to account for that, here you've been playing cahoots with him—no less."

"Against my own will, then," earnestly replied Mr. Thompson.

"Oh, come off the roof!"

"Easy, brother," said Ace King, in his smoothest, therefore his most dangerous tone of voice. "Give the gentleman a fair shake, can't you? And you, friend Thompson, make things just a weenty bit clearer, please."

"I ask for nothing better than a chance to do that very thing, my dear sir," earnestly declared the stranger, yet displaying a degree of nerve which contrasted strongly with his manner while in company with the Gilt-Edged Sport. "I never laid eyes on Gentleman Joe before this very evening, although I knew he must be in town."

"Wait a bit, stranger," once more cut in Tom King,

bluntly as before. "You say you never met Gentry before?"

"And I repeat it, sir, never before this evening, when he tapped me on the shoulder, as I sat at cards with you and Mr. Jackson."

"Just so. Then how came you to recognize him so mighty sudden? You greeted him as a friend, as an old-time pard; can you deny that?"

Mr. Thompson gave a subdued chuckle, seemingly in no wise disconcerted by this home-thrust, as King evidently considered it.

"Did I fool you, then, Mr. King?"

"You're not fooling me now, though, and don't you forget that."

"Better explain as we go along, Brother Thompson," smoothly said Ace King. "'Twill save us the trouble of going back, perhaps."

"Isn't it explained enough?" savagely growled his brother, only to receive the cold rebuke:

"Button up, Tom. Go on, Mr. Thompson, please."

"Thanks, I will. You saw Gentleman Joe tap me on the shoulder, and hand me that V. Mr. King? Of course you did, but you couldn't see what I saw; words written on the back of that bill. I've got it now, though I couldn't find it when Gentry asked me for it back again—of course I couldn't."

Mr. Thompson gave another oily chuckle, then added:

"May I go down into my pocket, gentlemen, to bring forth that same note? I can't well pull a gun while you both have the drop, you see."

"Wait a bit," said Ace King, his voice losing something of its smoothness, as he moved a little nearer the stranger. "What's all this about a bank-note? I'm hearing of it now for the first time."

"Just a scheme on Gentry's part to crowd into our game," Tom King explained. "He pretended to pick up a five from the floor, and when he asked Thompson, if he had dropped it, he said yes, and asked the Sport to take a hand in—just a scheme, I said, and I'm sticking to it, too."

"On Gentry's part, maybe, but not mine, as you'll agree when you take a look at the words written on that note. Just strike a match, and you can see for yourself, sir."

"And so set myself up as a target for Gentleman Joe?" harshly growled Ace King, gripping Mr. Thompson by the throat.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLAY FAIR, OR PLAY FOUL?

Muscular though he might be, Mr. Thompson seemed little better than a child in that strong grip, and then the desperado's revolver was rubbing against his nose, as its owner sternly added:

"Own up, curse you, or I'll lift your roof."

That fierce grip relaxed a trifle, and Mr. Thompson managed to splutter forth the words:

"On honor, sir. I swear I'm a friend to all who hate Joe Gentry."

"Don't shoot, Ace, when cold steel can serve so much the better," hastily interposed Tom King, drawing his knife and stepping forward. "Twist your arm a bit, and I'll let——"

"Back, you hot head! I'll manage him. Go you, and see if there's any one near. If there is, just give tongue, and we'll make a clean sweep."

When Ace King spoke in that voice, even his brother yielded obedience, and, crouching low down in the gloom, he glided away on his mission, while the head of the Royal Flush forced Mr. Thompson to his knees, muttering sternly:

"Kick, and you're a gone goslin, stranger."

"Don't strike home, until I do kick, sir, and I'll ask nothing better of good luck," whispered his captive, in still better guarded tones. "I swear I'm playing you white, even——"

Those muscular fingers tightened a bit, and Mr. Thompson took the hint at once. He said nothing more, until, after some five or six minutes devoted to a careful examination of the immediate vicinity, Tom King returned to unwillingly report:

"All's clear, so far as I could learn, brother, but——"

"If you couldn't smell him out, then I was wrong," said Ace, removing his hand and his weapon. "Beg pardon, sir, but I couldn't help thinking you were playing bait for Gentry, and so——"

"Never mention it, my dear sir," interrupted Mr. Thompson, with rare placidity, considering all things. "After the position that infernal Sport forced me into, I don't blame either of you for regarding me with ugly looks and worse suspicions. Still, as I said before, I'm on your side, as opposed to Gentleman Joe, and ask for nothing better than a fair chance to prove as much."

Tom King gave a sullen growl, but Ace seemed more inclined to take a friendly view of the matter, now he had been proven wrong in part, at least. He stood in doubt for a few seconds, gazing keenly into that disguised face, but the light was too uncertain for him to gain much information thus.

"Just wait on us a moment or two, please," he said, turning to his brother with a gesture. "A word with you, Tom, please."

The twins once more drew a little apart, conversing in guarded whispers, seemingly paying little or no attention to the stranger who was playing such an enigmatical role.

Nothing seemed easier than for Mr. Thompson to make his escape by a sudden plunge into the darkness, but he made no such attempt. Well, for him that he did not, too, for, with all their seeming carelessness, each one of the twins was waiting for just such a movement on his part, and his first movement would almost as surely have proved his last.

Nothing could have been better calculated to create a favorable impression, and, having stood this final test, Ace King was not long in coming to a decision.

"You say you can show proof that Gentleman Joe forced you into seeming his pardner?" he asked, in more friendly tones, coming nearer as he spoke.

"Yes, and I'm only asking the chance, sir."

"To gain that chance, are you willing to go home with us?"

Mr. Thompson hesitated for a few seconds, then frankly said:

"Provided you can keep that visit secret from Gentleman Joe, I am perfectly willing to go with you, gentlemen."

"Why from him, since you declare yourself his enemy?"

"To you I'm saying that, but—well, I've only a bit ago promised Gentry to back him up in his efforts to break up and wipe out the Royal Flush," said Thompson, with a low, amused chuckle.

"You know who compose that flush, of course? Quiet, brother!"

"Unless Gentry lied, yes. He told me the whole story; gave me notes relating to all from ace to ten-spot."

Ace King slipped a hand through his arm, as before, quietly saying:

"Hitch on, Tom. I reckon we'll go home for a bit."

Tom's grip was far less gentle than that of his brother, but Mr. Thompson seemed content with the way matters were shaping themselves, and offered neither word nor sign of objection to the proposed visit.

Whether he was playing fair, or playing foul, only the future could determine, but whatever his real motives, he appeared well content to bear the brothers company just then.

Quite as much for their own sake as that of their companion, the King brothers passed around the edge of the town, lengthening their walk considerably in order to gain their house with least risk of attracting outside attention; and for the same reason, no doubt, Tom King hurried on in advance when their destination was nearly reached, to make sure the coast was entirely clear.

"All's well, and we're getting there in fine shape, Brother Thompson," said Ace King, cheerfully, as a low whistle came back from the dark porch. "Even if Gentleman Joe is on the prowl, he'll hardly smoke us, now."

"I'm feeling a powerful sight easier my own self, than I'd be if I reckoned he'd dropped to the double I'm playing him," said the other, with a keen glance around as they moved forward.

Tom King had the door on the latch, and they were

quickly inside, Ace leading their guest into a room where Queen Esther and Lucky Jackson were sitting together, while his brother lingered to secure the outer door.

Mr. Thompson doffed his hat, bowing low before that stately woman, paying no attention to the scowling gambler, who was nursing his injured hand, which certainly ached none the less because of his coming.

"A friend of ours, according to his own account, Queen," said Ace, by way of introduction.

"Why didn't he bring Gentleman Joe along to vouch for him?" viciously snarled the wounded gambler.

"Possibly because he reckoned one crippled paw was all you could nurse comfortably, Jackson," curtly said his master, adding in still sharper tones. "Just simmer, please, until it's your time to chip."

"Charmed to form your acquaintance, sir, if Mr. King says I'd ought to feel that way," said Queen Esther, with a sweeping courtesy, and a half-mocking smile upon her beautiful face the while. "But—as the room is rather warm, don't you think you'd feel a bit more comfortable with your face in its natural condition, sir?"

Tom King broke into a laugh, while even Lucky Jackson gave the semblance of a smile; but Mr. Thompson showed scant confusion at that pointed hint, promptly saying:

"Of course, your wish is my law, madam, and if you'll kindly tell me where I can find warm weather, I'll cheerfully undergo the soaking."

Ace King swiftly put forth a hand, catching that heavy beard between his fingers, but his forcible twitch failed to start the mass in the slightest degree, and Mr. Thompson added:

"Only by water, or by the knife, my dear sir. I knew I was tackling a dangerous task when I came here, and I made my preparations accordingly."

"And that task is—just what?"

"Avenging the death of my brother, Dick Turner, as he was best known here in the West. Although I believed Gentry was as ignorant of my face, as I certainly was of his, I thought it wisest to take no wild chances."

"Yet his eyes are keen enough to penetrate a far more perfect disguise than the one you are wearing, sir. Or, did you have an equally good excuse to offer him?"

"A still better one, I begin to think," with unlooked for frankness as he smilingly encountered that stern gaze.

"At least, Gentleman Joe took my explanation without even winking his incredulity, and—but that comes in a little later."

Mr. Thompson, seemingly entirely at his ease, thrust a hand into his bosom, bringing forth a carefully-folded bank-note, and as he smoothed this out, he added:

"First, to explain why I acted as I did in that unfortunate little game of ours this evening. You remember how, Gentleman Joe chipped in, Mr. King, and you, Mr. Jackson?"

"At your invitation, yes," gruffly growled the injured gambler.

"At my invitation just so," with a suave bow. "But why did I give that invitation?"

"Because you and he had put up a job, of course."

Mr. Thompson permitted his bland smile to extend into a low, easy chuckle at this vicious retort, but Ace King, knowing how wickedly Jackson could act when fairly aroused, quickly interposed, holding forth a hand for the bill which had played such a prominent part in that unfortunate affair.

"Enough chatter, sir; let me see your marvel."

Mr. Thompson instantly relinquished the bit of paper, falling back a pace, smiling even more blandly than ever as both Queen and Tom King pressed forward for a look over their chief's shoulder.

Fairly filling the oval blank to the left of the center were the boldly shaped letters forming the words:

"Foul play; ask me to chip in."

Ace King quickly mastered those few words, then tossed the bill across to Lucky Jackson, who gave vent to a deep, vicious oath, as he took in its meaning.

Mr. Thompson lost his bland smile, an expression of injured amazement taking its place as the chief turned upon him, with a still darker frown. Surely this man was hard to please.

"And still you say that Gentleman Joe is not your pard?"

Yet you admit he wrote that warning for your eyes alone?"

Mr. Thompson gave a short, dry chuckle, but met that suspicious gaze without flinching in the least, frankly speaking:

"I say just that, Mr. King, and I stand ready to prove my truth, by any test you may see fit to impose upon me."

"Yet—why did he warn you that the lads were cheating you?"

"I didn't know he was warning me of that, you see, for the sober truth runs like this; I was cheating from start to finish my own self, and I thought his nibs meant to expose my foul play, unless I let him in for a share of the pudding; don't you twig?"

Both Tom King and Lucky Jackson stared at the speaker with wide eyes, for experts though they were with the papers, this was their first intimation that they also had been playing against art as well as fortune. And even yet they could not fully believe it.

"There's nothing easier than to put me to the test, gentlemen," Mr. Thompson added, with his blandest smile, as he read their doubts in each face. "I'm more than willing to show you I can play foul, if I like, but first—one word more, I beg."

"I never met either of you gentlemen before, and hence you seemed perfectly legitimate game. I needed hard cash, and you seemed able if not exactly willing to supply that need. I played square until I saw you were not above helping good luck out, and then I waded in, up to my lips. I really believe I could have handled either one of you alone, but two such neat hands—of course I came off loser."

"I really thought that fellow meant to expose me, and, being a complete stranger, I naturally dreaded that, knowing how surely I'd come out of the mill in mighty poor condition. And so—I knuckled."

Mr. Thompson plunged a hand into his pocket, bringing forth a roll of bills, nearly every one of which bore marks of Gentleman Joe's dagger, and, stepping forward, he offered them to Lucky Jackson, saying:

"Where all hands were cheating, the biggest bluff deserves the pot. I'm sorry I can't offer you the entire amount, Mr. Jackson, but Gentleman Joe insisted on raking down his share, and—well, you know what a mighty persuasive way he's got, when he feels that way, I reckon."

Tom King broke into a laugh, which was joined in by Queen Esther. Jackson scowled, flushing hotly. Ace King looked sterner than ever, but Mr. Thompson paid scant heed to this warning signal as he turned that way to add, in clear, grave tones:

"Will you back me up, if I agree to lay Joseph Gentry out, Mr. King?"

CHAPTER IX.

MR. THOMPSON DROPS A HINT.

"What interest can we hold in your private quarrels, sir?" quickly interposed Queen Esther, her eyes telegraphing a warning to those of her husband, as Ace King turned her away for an instant.

"That's what I'm saying," chipped in Tom, bluntly. "You claim a red-hot wish to down Gentry, from your own account; well, why didn't you do that, in place of backing him up this evening?"

"If you mean before the lights went out, sir, he had me under his thumb, as I've proven. If later, well, better and smarter men than I'm pretending to be slipped up on downing the villain."

"Right and left for you fellows," nodded Ace, with a fleeting smile, clearly enjoying that portion of the sparring match, even though he might still have doubts concerning Mr. Thompson and the account he was giving of himself.

"Meaning no slur, of course, but simply stating a painful fact," the easy-spoken stranger added, with an apologetic bow. "I don't claim to be a chief when it comes to fire-eating, while I've picked up enough to feel mighty sure this Gentleman Joe is just that. I do want to down him, but I reckon you folks wish it pretty nigh as badly."

"If so we know how to fall to work," coldly retorted Queen Esther. "We back no man's game. If there must

be a killing all must show fair on the face of it or we'll be cleaned out by Horace Eagle and his gang of heelers."

"Fair or foul, I'll never rest easy until I've played even with the devil who dealt me this hand!" harshly cried Lucky Jackson, lifting aloft that bandaged member, his broad face fairly aglow with hatred and lust for revenge.

"Well, Gentry said he gave you that as a fair warning. If that failed to produce a good effect the next thing he'd take would be your head," calmly lied Mr. Thompson, beaming benevolently upon the wounded gambler, who burst into a flood of curses, doubly heated.

"Put a plug in, Lucky," sternly ordered the chief, then turning toward the stranger, to add, "And you, Mr. Thompson, if that's your legal handle, measure your speech just a little more carefully please. I'm a long ways from being satisfied you're not playing us dirt even now."

"I've met gentlemen easier to suit, Mr. King. How can I satisfy you, then?"

"By talking straight, just for a change," growlingly said Tom King.

"If I cared to counter, sir, I might ask what's twisted your eyes, but as I appear to be among enemies instead of the friends I hoped to find perhaps I'd better trust to plain truth, letting sarcasm go. And as a starter let me give you at least an idea how matters stand in relation to Gentleman Joe."

"I told you how I got all mixed up in my ideas back yonder, and I was still in the muddle when Gentry disputed that pot. Next thing I knew was the lack of outer lights, and I made a grab for the boodle, feeling pretty sure some other hand would, if mine didn't. But I've already accounted for that bit of work."

"I've been caught in one or two such mixes in my time, and therefore felt the best way to get out was to git! I followed Gentry out through the window, and helped him dodge some nasty blue pills which came singing out for a patient over our way."

"From my pill-box," explained Tom King.

"I thought more than likely, but Gentry was on the hustle, and as I began to cool up a bit I reckoned I could make more by sticking to his nibs than by asking impolite questions."

"Did you engage him for the entire night, Ace?" asked Queen Esther, with an admirably counterfeited yawn of weariness. "How often does he require winding up?"

As in duty bound her subjects laughed at this sally but Mr. Thompson bowed in all submission, quietly adding:

"I'll boil it down gladly, madam, only I thought nothing less than the entire bakery would suffice. In one word, then, I stuck by Gentleman Joe, hoping for a sure chance to pay off old scores without too openly signing myself his slayer. I didn't catch that chance, but I learned enough to make me resolve to look up the Royal Flush."

"With what object, sir?"

"To tell those composing it either they or Joe Gentry must go down for good and all."

His manner, even more than his words, impressed the little party, and as they interchanged glances Mr. Thompson had time to add:

"Gentleman Joe took me to his room, and there put me through a course of sprouts, pretty nigh as keen as I'm catching right here, but I'd time enough to hatch up a plausible story, and I poured it into his ears so thick and so fast that he had to knock under. He began by more than doubting, but he ended by firmly believing me your bitterest foe, his warmest friend."

"And that success cocked you up so high you concluded to try the same trick with us?" asked Tom King, still doubting.

"Would I be fool enough to offer you such an opening unless I knew I held a perfect guard against the thrust?" blandly asked Mr. Thompson.

"Shut trap, Tom. Let the gentleman have his say out, since he's here at my invitation. Go on, my dear fellow, but remember that nights are short, and patience hath its limits."

"Thanks. I made Gentleman Joe believe I was hunting a villain who had ruined my home and ran away with my angel wife. I swore that one of you brothers was the foul

knave, to the best of my belief, and most solemnly vowed I'd never quit the hunt until I'd bagged my game.

"That touched his soft spot in the end, and he opened his heart a bit more frankly. He said Hardscrabble wasn't large enough to contain both the Royal Flush and Gentleman Joe. He declared he was too lazy to run away, and consequently would let you do the flitting, unless you preferred faring worse."

"Curse him!" snarled Lucky Jackson, with a vicious shake of his wounded hand. "He's crippled one half of me, but I'm good for him, even so. I'll play even, or lose my head as well."

Mr. Thompson turned a keen, searching pair of eyes upon the angry gambler, apparently summing him up, not altogether without satisfaction, judging from the grim glitter which leaped into those keen orbs.

"You're hungry to play even then?" he asked, gently.

"Yes, with both of you, for that matter."

"Leave me out, please, pardner. Once more, you've got nerve?"

"Maybe you doubt I have, then?"

"It takes precious little nerve to bluff me down," almost meekly admitted the stranger, then adding, quickly, "But unless all accounts lie, it takes more than a little bit to brace even a good man against the Gilt-edged Sport. Still you wouldn't be afraid to stand up against Gentleman Joe if you knew his guns were crippled?"

As a usual thing Lucky Jackson was seldom at a loss for words in which to express his meaning or sentiments, but just now he felt a lack, and before he could fairly fill it Ace King chipped in:

"You mean something, sir; what is it?"

Mr. Thompson laughed low, but wickedly. It was far from an agreeable sound, and apparently he realized as much, since he made haste to say:

"Beg pardon, I'm sure, but I really couldn't help laughing over a bit of the past which occurred to me just then. May I tell it? Boiled down 'twill not take long, and I think you'll find it applies pretty closely to the point I'm trying to make against Joe Gentry."

"Explain yourself, please."

"Thanks for the privilege, and here you have it all. I once stood second to a very pretty fellow in a duel, and of course I was bound in honor to do my level best for his interests. Yet, would you believe it, I never found out until my principal was cold meat that the foresight of his gun had been knocked so far out of plum that his lead flew two feet wide of his man, though he could split a bullet on a knife-blade twenty times hand running at the same distance."

Mr. Thompson smiled blandly as he ceased speaking, glancing swiftly from face to face of his little audience. Not one of them spoke, but each face told how certainly its owner had caught the full meaning of that little anecdote.

"And so, you see, there's such a thing as getting left on what one would swear was a dead sure thing. Odds were so heavy on my friend that never a bet was placed, yet he was the one who filled a high lot on the hill-side, and his adversary did the tall crowing."

"What are you trying to get at, man?" sharply asked Ace King. "Out with it in just so many words, can't you?"

"I was merely waiting for permission, my dear sir," bowed the fellow, then speaking with almost brutal directness. "If either one of you gentlemen feel like meeting Gentleman Joe on a level I'll agree to have his guns on the sick list, and he'll only find that out when he's reached the further shore."

Once more Queen Esther interposed, strong suspicion showing on face and in voice.

"Have nothing to do with it, I say!" she exclaimed, hotly. "I believe it's all a plan. I believe Joe Gentry sent him here to draw one or all of us into a cunning trap!"

"If it's a plant at all 'tis to plant Gentleman Joe," earnestly declared Mr. Thompson. "Put me to any reasonable test you can devise, and if I don't come out pure white then I'll pay full penalty."

"If a plant there's enough of you left to plant him, I reckon," the wounded member said, with more of his usual coolness than he had displayed since receiving his

hurt. "I'd made up my mind to have a fair go at Gentry, but if I can catch him at a disadvantage so much the better for our side."

"Can you count on putting your lead right where it'll do the most good, pardner?" asked Mr. Thompson.

"Don't make me try a shot at you, if you really wish to know."

"Thanks muchly. As for planting, I hope you'll plant me, gentlemen, if I don't deal you a square hand in this little game. Of course if you prefer taking chances in a free-for-all, that lets me out."

"We can't do that without bringing Race Eagle and his posse down upon us. We've got plenty of well-wishers in town, but not enough to let us openly override the law. And so—you think you can turn this trick, Thompson?"

"Know it, comes nearer the bull's eye, sir. On my honor as a crook from boyhood, I've got Gentleman Joe on a string, and if put on his oath he'd vow I was his best friend and backer as against the Royal Flush."

"Would he be so far wrong, I'm wondering?" almost harshly spoke up Queen Esther. "Don't mix in, husband, I beg of you. In my heart I feel that only harm can come out of this business."

"Of course, if madam objects, that settles it," coldly said Mr. Thompson, with a bow of resignation. "I'll withdraw my proposition, and beg you to forget 'twas ever made."

"Then what?"

"I'll play a lone hand, of course. Being a stranger in camp I naturally thought 'twould be a bit safer to have solid backing, and after Gentleman Joe told me he and you were at odds this little trick came into my mind. Still I can afford to let it go if you think you can do the same."

"Measure your words, Mr. Thompson, sternly warned Ace King.

"I'm talking by rule, Mr. King," with a grave bow.

"As I told you first off, I came here with one distinct end in view—to avenge the death of my brother on the one at whose door that death rightly lies.

"I've found my game, but it promises to be a tougher nut to crack than I calculated on before I really knew his standing in Hardscrabble, and his mettle as a man. I'm no chicken, but I'll admit I'm dubious about taking an open fly at him with the gaffs on and all hands called up to play witness.

"I've sworn to down him, though, and I'll make that vow good, but when he's found toes up, as he surely will be found, at whose door do you reckon that killing will be placed?"

Slowly, meaningly came that final question, and as he caught its full purport Ace King savagely demanded:

"Is that meant for a threat—against us, sir?"

"Don't you think it, man dear. Not a threat, but a friendly hint, I assure you, on honor. I've sworn to down Gentry, and I'll keep my oath. The only question for you to decide is this: will you give me backing, or can you afford to let me go at it hap-hazard fashion?"

CHAPTER X.

A LESSON IN GOOD MANNERS.

The clouds which threatened a storm that night passed away, and the new day dawned clear and perfect, just warm enough to make a healthy man feel lazy, provided he was able to live without manual labor.

Gentleman Joe was one of those favored beings, and after a late breakfast was placidly enjoying himself and his cigar, seated in a chair on the roofed piazza which ran along the front of the Occidental Hotel.

Only a short distance to his left was seated Mr. William Thompson, similarly engaged, and looking even more thoroughly at peace with himself and all the rest of mankind.

His chair was tilted upon its "hind legs," those broad shoulders being supported by the clap-boarded front of the building. His soft felt hat was slouched over his face, and from under its brim came lazy curls of blue vapor, just often enough to keep the weed alight.

To Gentry's right was seated the tall, gangling figure of

the city marshal, Horace, or, more familiarly, "Race" Eagle. That worthy official took his tobacco in a different form, his lantern-jaws steadily working upon a liberal allowance of "black navy," and at odd intervals Mr. Eagle took a yellow shot at a white stone half buried in the street, seemingly having no more important purpose in life than to paint that target an even color.

It was a typically lazy day, and few words passed between the trio. If the rather unusual events of the past night occupied either brain no outward token was given to that effect.

Still, lazy though they one and all appeared, Gentleman Joe was wide enough awake to catch an early glimpse of a tall figure as it came in that direction, and with a faint smile lighting up his countenance he quietly spoke:

"Big Casino wasn't so drunk last night, but that he's able to navigate this morning."

Mr. Thompson gave a barely perceptible start, but said nothing. The marshal grunted forth:

"Come to pay fer them winder-glass, mebbe. Fust thing the dug-gun howler knows he'll ketch a dose of plumbago him 'own self. The idee o' sech like as him settin' up fer bein' a chief."

"If Dan'l howls to order can you blame the poor fellow, Race?" asked the Gilt-edged Sport, with a yawn.

"The hull cussed gang ought fer to be kicked clean out o' the country, an' it's me that's sayin' of it, too."

"Saying isn't doing, and no one man can hope to run a town like Hardscrabble, pardner, even though that man be good as they make 'em. You've got law on your side, of-course, but they've got the backing."

Marshal Eagle contented himself with a surly growl, for by this time Big Casino, as Daniel Diamond was generally known, had drawn too near for open speech without notes being taken.

Daniel came with a dignified strut of his own, his battered hat cocked over one eye and ear, his thumbs tucked under his armpits, his flaxen-hued beard bristling more than usual as his chin was thrust forward.

He came to a halt just beyond the low flight of steps leading up to the porch, deliberately gazing at first one, then another of the trio, neither of whom spoke a word or, indeed, appeared to be aware of his presence at all.

"Taint you, nur yit him," croaked Daniel, with a nod at Mr. Thompson, then toward the city marshal. "Both o' you 'pear clean white, ef ye be dirty on the outside, but—waal, I be durned!"

Just as though he for the first time caught sight of a third personage before him Big Casino dashed the limp brim of his hat up and back, then propped both hands upon his slightly bent knees, staring like one half bewildered, his chin dropping, his breath issuing in a low, prolonged whistle.

His manner was coarsely offensive, but Gentleman Joe paid him no attention, lazily puffing at his cigar for a few moments, during which that inspection lasted.

"Is it livin', or jest stuffed fer a sign?" asked Big Casino, in a clumsy aside. "It kin smoke yit—from the smell I smell, him as did the stuffin' didn't 'pear to keer much 'bout how he done the cleanin' out fust. An'—billy-be-dog-gone ef it don't git me bad."

Neither of the trio spoke, nor did either move, but a low, hissing sound came from under Mr. Thompson's slouch hat, apparently in warning for the benefit of the man with whom he had joined hands the night before.

This utter disregard for his theatricals seemed to sting Diamond, for, dropping his clumsy antics, he gruffly asked:

"Mornin', gents, ef thar's a tongue amongst ye all. Whar kin I find a monkey-dude who hain't no better show o' manners then to call himself Gentleman Joe Gentry?"

Both Thompson and Eagle looked toward the party named, who languidly glanced over that huge figure before speaking, but when his words came they meant something.

"Take off your hat when you address gentlemen, you lackey."

Big Casino gave an involuntary start at those coldly distinct words, and a half-confused expression came into his heavy face as his huge hand mechanically dropped

toward one of the pistols his cartridge-studded belt supported.

"Eh? Did I hear—which—"

"Take off your hat, sir!" came the repetition, and swifter than eye could follow Gentleman Joe had the big bully covered with a cocked revolver. "Hands up, Dan Diamond, if you please."

It was impossible to doubt that meaning, and though he certainly had come there with quarrelsome intentions Big Casino found his hands rising almost before he knew it.

"Hold on, dug-gun ye fer a—"

"Take off your hat, or I'll shoot it away," coldly added the Gilt-edged Sport, his gun following that cowardly shrinking.

Calm and measured though that tone was, those steel-gray eyes meant obedience or death, and Big Casino had just wit enough left to fully recognize that fact, and he pulled off his head-covering without further delay or demur.

"You're not half the fool you look, Big Casino, but you stand sorely in need of a lesson on etiquette."

"Eh? I don't—"

"But you're going to, Daniel, and one of the first items in that lesson is to learn never to interrupt a gentleman while he's talking for your own good. Another is to uncover when you approach your superiors, for—steady, Daniel!"

"I was jest fetchin' ye—"

"Quiet, you dog! How dare you speak until bidden, sir? Now for the next step in politeness, Daniel; you forgot to bow before speaking, just as you omitted to uncover your blockhead in token of your miserable inferiority."

"I'll see you hanged fust!" viciously growled the enraged giant, but still afraid to snatch at his gun while that weapon held him so perfectly covered.

"Besides being an ignorant lout, Daniel, you're addicted to lying. If you were drunk, as you were last night, for instance, when you emptied your gun through my window, there would be some slight excuse for that fault. Now—bow, and beg my pardon, sir."

"Be durned ef I will, then."

"You'll fare worse if you don't, Daniel. Bow and beg, I say, or when I count six I'll kill you for the dirty whelp you surely are."

There was no trace of jesting in face or in tones, and realizing as much Big Casino gave an awkward bob of his head, at the same time giving an indistinct mumble, which certainly sounded far more like an oath than an apology.

Still the form was observed, and Gentleman Joe gave a curt nod of approval, then adding:

"Not so badly performed for a maiden effort, Daniel."

"I'll play even—I'll hev yer heart's blood fer this, cuss ye," viciously snarled the enraged colossus.

"Silence, you mangy cur!" sternly cried the Gilt-edged Sport, casting aside all pretense at suavity, voice, eyes, face, all proving how thoroughly in earnest he was.

"You've been spoiling for a lesson of this description for a long time past, Big Casino, and I've only been waiting a fair opportunity for administering it."

"Keep your hands elevated, or I'll send you to Satan, your other master."

Although the words spoken were hardly raised above the ordinary level, even this soon curious eyes were turning toward that scene, and from more quarters than one, citizens of more or less respectability were drawing nearer, eager to hear as well as see.

Again that sibilant whistle came from the heavily bearded lips of William Thompson, though as yet he had not seen fit to even place his chair on its own level, or to push the slouch hat-brim from over his eyes.

"All right, pardner," said Gentleman Joe, in token of understanding. "Don't come in too fast a rush, gentlemen, I beg of you," he said, lifting his voice high enough for all to catch with distinctness. "This is a private duet, and we're perfectly competent to handle the music without volunteer chorus."

"I'll chorus you ef it kills me!" growled Diamond, hotly.

"After you've taken this lesson to the finish, Daniel,

we'll talk about weltering in hot gore. Just now—open your ears, dog!"

"You've lived long enough on the record of the Royal Flush, and now it's high time for your leaky tub to stand upon its own bottom. You've made an infernal nuisance of yourself for months past. You've stunk in the nostrils of all honest men. You've swilled like a hog, you've barked like a cur dog, you've ruffled up to better men like a dung-hill rooster, but all the while knowing, as they knew, you'd never dare crow above your breath only for those at your back."

"You don't dast to give me even hafe a show, dug-gun ye, critter!"

"Nor would you dare take it if offered on the level, you hound."

"Jest try me once! Jest—I say, Race Eagle!" turning a savage glare toward the city marshal, who had never cracked a smile through all this scene, and who leisurely emptied his mouth before drawling:

"What's hinderin' ye sayin' of it, then, Casino?"

"I call on ye in the name o' law an'—"

"That's dif'rent," curtly chipped in the officer, dropping his feet from railing to floor, and rearing aloft his gangling frame. "Es a common citizen I hedn't ary say-so, but es a repersentative o' the law I reckon I'm in Jewty bound fer to keep the peace, gents."

"I'll help you, my dear sir," blandly spoke Gentleman Joe, at the same instant covering the marshal with his second revolver.

CHAPTER XI.

A LESSON IN BOXING.

As he spoke Gentleman Joe rose to his feet, deftly kicking his chair out of the way as he moved until his back was brushing the wall. Yet so adroitly was it all performed that Big Casino could not catch a chance to either draw a gun or jump aside from that dangerous alignment.

The Gilt-edged Sport certainly was not afflicted with strabismus, yet he performed the delicate feat of keeping two armed men covered, in widely different directions, yet gave each one the distinct impression that he alone had the doubtful compliment of both keen eyes taking note of his slightest movement, if not his very thoughts.

"Steady, Casino! And you, marshal, touch lightly!" came in cold yet sharp warning from those lips.

"Don't bother 'bout wastin' a ca'tridge on me, Gentry, onless you've got sech a big plenty ye don't know what better use to make of 'em," quietly remarked Race Eagle.

"He's ag'in all law an' order, an' that fetches him whar—"

"Don't make me 'fetch' you, Daniel," cut in the man who held the key to the situation. "That would be wasting a cartridge, indeed, but—keep those dukes elevated, or I'll lay you down with them."

"I reckon you'd better, Casino," said the marshal, taking this bit of experience with his habitual coolness. "I kin see shoot in one eye, an' pull-trigger in t'other, from right hyar, nur I hain't strainin' the winkers o' me nuther."

"Look at 'em, taking water!"

"Born bull-frogs, the two of 'em."

"Ready to duck, boys, for Gentleman Joe's going for a clean sweep!"

These and similar expressions came from the spectators, now a goodly number, but none of them ventured to interfere, and there were no open objectors when Gentry called aloud:

"Hands off, and bridle on, gentlemen. I'm trying to run this little kindergarten on humanitarian principles, but if you offer too persistent advice my pupils may turn refractory. And that—shall I cripple that uneasy arm of yours, Big Casino?"

"I cain't stan' this yer way all day, kin I, dug-gun ye?"

"You'll have to wait my pleasure for a change at least. Marshall?"

"I'm a-waitin' the patientest I know how, Gentry."

"You are expected to preserve good order in Hardscrabble, I believe, are you not?"

"Waal, when I kin, but jest now——" hesitated Eagle, with a half humorous grimace on his gaunt visage.

"Just now the surest method of preventing bloodshed, good or evil, is for you to grant the request I'm about to make. Will you do it, or must I issue an order?"

"I reckon a order'd come heftiest, mebbe, though that 'pends a powerful sight on jest the sort o' truck you want out o' me, sir."

"All right; order it shall be. Don't yield to temptation and pull a gun, marshal, or I'll have to salivate you. Now—march! Go down these steps in the first place."

Gravely, as though he had not the slightest conception of what was to follow, Race Eagle obeyed that command, pausing as his feet struck the earth, but without lowering his hands or turning his head for a look backward.

"Right, left, or straight forward, boss?" he asked, gravely.

"Steady, Casino! Pass around the big fellow, marshal, without giving him a chance to use your body as a barricade. I'd really hate to drop such a promising pupil, but——"

"I'll drop you, cuss ye!" snarlingly cried the humiliated giant, as an undisguised laugh came from the highly amused spectators. "Ef I ever ketch a chainece I'll drap you, too, dead to skin!"

"I'm going to give you a chance, Daniel, so keep your linen on for a few seconds longer. After that—we'll see what we do see."

Meanwhile Marshal Eagle was soberly marching in strict obedience to orders, grave as a mute at a funeral, his hands held above his head, his lantern-jaws working vigorously upon his "cud."

Making a curve he drew around to the rear of the big fellow, then cast an inquiring glance toward the master of ceremonies.

"That's what, now comes which, boss?"

"Disarm Big Casino, please," came the cold command, emphasized by the words of warning, "I mean strictly business, gentlemen, and though I hope to avoid such extremes I'll kill either one or both of you if an attempt is made to pull a gun. Now, take off that belt!"

Dan Diamond cursed, but with those pistols staring so steadily his way he dared offer no resistance, and Race Eagle clearly felt it his duty to comply with what he could not deny.

The broad buckle was deftly opened, and the heavily laden belt was swung clear of its owner's person.

"Shell I go through his clothes, boss?" asked Eagle, meekly.

"No, I hardly think there's any need of that. Daniel's so mighty fond of frills that he always wears 'em in open sight," said Gentleman Joe, with a change of manner.

He lowered the hammers of his revolvers and thrust the weapons into their scabbards, then removed belt and all, swinging it across to where Mr. Thompson was still sitting at his ease, saying:

"Oblige me by taking charge of my arsenal, pardner?"

"With pleasure, sir. Until when, may I ask?"

"Until I've concluded the little lecture-lesson Big Casino invited," carelessly replied Gentry, then turning away, to leisurely descend the steps, smiling lazily as he saw Diamond reaching an eager hand toward his weapons.

"You asked for an even chance, you overgrown bully, and now I'm offering it you are too cowardly to accept the favor."

"I'll kill him ef I die fer it!" raged the humiliated giant, hardly conscious of his own wild words. "Gi' me my gun, durn ye, or—hold on, you!"

He recoiled abruptly, for Race Eagle was actually offering one of the weapons demanded, but it came muzzle first.

"I'll give it to ye in sections, Dan'l, ef you cain't git 'long without her," coolly said the marshal. "You hollered fer me to keep the peace, an' I'm duty bound fer to keep it, even ef I hev to make you one o' them same pieces, d'ye mind, now?"

A menacing sound came from some of the witnesses, for even among the roughest of mankind there is a sentiment of fair-play, and this action on the part of the city marshal certainly savored of double-dealing.

Gentleman Joe was swift to realize as much, and pausing he flung up a deprecatory hand, crying aloud:

"Peace, gentlemen, and if you really object, when all's set, I'll not only apologize to you but to Big Casino as well."

"Give Dan his tools, then talk."

"Haven't I voluntarily unarmed myself? Is he such a weakling that he can't stand up before a giant like me unless he has both hands full of pops?"

"I kin stan' up plenty long to down you, cuss ye!" angrily roared Big Casino, turning toward his enemy, shaking his huge fists.

"In your mind, no, doubt, Daniel. You've frequently boasted that you could thrash any man in this section, but you were simply bluffing, of course?"

"I kin lick you, an' never turn a ha'r, blast ye, critter!"

"You haven't got a stray penny that says you're in sober earnest, Daniel? If so, I'll lay you two to one that you can't even begin to whip one side of me," mockingly retorted the Gilt-edged Sport.

Big Casino eagerly caught at this chance to play even for all the humiliation he had undergone, and seemingly forgot all about his belt of arms for the time being.

"You don't dast to give me hafe a show, fer I kin——"

"I'm offering you a great deal bigger show than you'll ever manage to your own profit, Daniel," cut in Gentry. "You've lived on wind and bluffing so long that unless some one takes you down you'll really begin to think you're a man in place of a fraud."

"Keep it up, critter, fer the more you say the bigger you'll pay," grimly said the colossus, growing calmer as that prospect brightened. "I come over this way on a gentleman's arr'nd, an' you've treated me wuss'n a sheep-killin' dog. You ketched the drop afore I was lookin', comin' on sech a arr'nd, but now—even ef you've got guns in all o' yer pockets, I kin smash ye afore you kin pull an' blaze!"

"I say, gentlemen," chipped in the marshal, "this yer hain't keepin' the peace, looks like, an' so——"

"It's as near the peace as you'll be able to fitch it, Eagle," the Gilt-edged Sport declared, seriously, in his turn. "If you'll hold off I'll thrash the fight all out of Daniel, but if you crowd us—well, it's fists or guns, that's flat."

"Sounds like more wind than ary thing else, but ef ye raally mean it, critter—hyar's at ye!"

Big Casino made his rush, full of evil, but Gentleman Joe evaded him by a deft duck and spring aside, his open hand going up by way of calling a truce.

"I'll give you your lesson in boxing, Casino, but there's no use in spoiling good clothes that I see. Strip, and I'll do the same. In all candor I assure you you'll need every advantage you can get to start off with."

"Ye won't try to run 'way, then?" doubtfully asked Diamond.

"If I run you'll be leading the procession, Daniel," lightly retorted Gentleman Joe, as he removed his silk hat, placing it on the steps, following it with collar and cuffs. "And that's why I wanted to get into light-marching order. I never could run for a cent in tight clothes."

"Run? From the likes o' you?"

"You've run from many a worse man, Daniel," mocked the Sport, seemingly bent on working his adversary into a still blinder rage, if such a thing was possible. "You've made your brags that no man living was smart enough to get the drop on you when your eyes were open. I've proved you a liar this day."

"You've repeatedly declared that you could thrash any man in this section with bare hands. I'm going to prove you a still bigger liar, and do it all the more cheerfully because you've seen fit to throw dirty hints and slurs my way."

"Which I'll prove true, cuss ye, ef you'll ever git ready to act place o' chawin' empty wind!"

"Form a ring, gentlemen, and you, marshal, please act as master of ceremonies, will you? This is a fight to the finish, and if any person tries to chip before one or the other of us has cried enough, down him, and down him hard! How's that, Mr. Diamond? Can he ask anything fairer?"

"It's your hollerin', an' don't ye fergit it, critter! Shell I keep on waitin' ontel the sun goes—ugh!"

That living ring was partly formed before Gentleman Joe made the suggestion, and it was speedily perfected, the citizens being only too willing to play a minor part in the little excitement. Then, before Big Casino could

complete his taunt, the Gilt-Edged Sport sprang forward, slapping him on each cheek with open hands.

The blows cracked sharply, though no actual harm was done, beyond turning the surprised giant fairly wild with rage and thirst for revenge as his mocker leaped lightly back, his hands going up, on guard.

With a howl of fury, Big Casino rushed forward, striking wildly in his madness, but Gentleman Joe dodged one fist, brushed the other aside with seeming ease, then checked his adversary with a double, one, two, sending his head back until the muscles of his neck cracked audibly, and staining his flaxen beard bright red from twin gashes under each eye.

"I gave you a lesson in manners, now take another on the art of boxing, you clumsy brute!" he cried, tauntingly, springing lightly aside, on guard once more.

Big Casino was too intensely infuriated for speech, and repeated his crazy rush, seemingly with only one thought, to close with his skillful antagonist, then crush him by main strength.

Just as often was his rush foiled. Gentleman Joe proved himself a past master in the art of boxing, his movements easy and smooth, yet each blow he delivered not only found its mark, but left an additional one wherever his hard knuckles fell.

It was a brutal scene, and hardly one to dwell upon at length, yet it would have been more repulsive had the men been more evenly matched in size and weight, or had Big Casino been less a brute himself. Not a man present but knew he meant killing if he could bring that to pass, and more than one among those whose secret sympathies were against Gentleman Joe and in favor of the Royal Flush, came nearer laughing than mourning over the big bully's sufferings, just then.

In startling contrast to that blind fury, was the light, careless, laughing demeanor of the Gilt-Edged Sport, and though he was kept in constant motion, to elude those dangerous rushes, his wind seemed unimpaired, and his jesting comments won many a laugh from the spectators.

"You're falling all over yourself, Daniel, and you'd dirty the very ground if I didn't keep propping you—just so!" he declared, sending home another double, laughingly evading the blind counter. "Why don't you keep your eyes open, stupid? How can you expect to learn anything, if you won't profit by the example I'm setting you? Why not—there you go again, running your ugly mug dead against my poor knuckles!"

As a lesson in boxing, it could hardly be called a success, so far as teaching Big Casino science, but as a punishment for vain boasting, it proved a decided success.

Still Diamond would not change his foolish tactics, but persisted in trying to grasp Gentry in his arms, though his liquor-puffed face was already cut to ribbons by those straight strokes. Then—Gentry actually lowered his guard, standing still until Diamond, with a savage roar of deadly exultation, fairly caught him about the body.

CHAPTER XII.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

"Now I hev got ye!" roared the colossus, as he felt his adversary fairly in his mighty clutch. "I'll break ye in two, or I'll never——"

He plainly meant even more than his lips uttered, and a cry of consternation broke from the lips of Race Eagle as he saw his friend thus coolly invite what seemed defeat, if not death itself.

But Gentleman Joe knew what he was doing, and with all his seeming recklessness, he was quick enough to secure his favorite hold, and in barely a half dozen seconds—before Big Casino could fairly exert his enormous strength—the deed was done.

A trip, a wrench, a mighty heave, then the bully went down, striking with sickening force upon his head and one shoulder, while Gentleman Joe, staggering a bit, but still upon his feet, stood unharmed.

A wild cry burst from many a pair of lips, but the Gilt-Edged lifted a hand, saying sternly:

"Don't add to the shame of a beaten man, gentlemen. Diamond did the best he knew how, and if he failed, he

stood more punishment than almost any other man present could or would have endured."

"I reckon he's done stood his last of it, though," almost ruefully uttered the city marshal, gazing at that quivering mass. "Ef you've bu'sted his neck, Gentry, I reckon it'H—"

"Look after him, some of you, gentlemen," coldly cut in the Sport, passing to the steps on which his property was resting, taking a handkerchief from his coat, wiping the blood from his hands as well as he could without water. "His neck's all right. It's proof against anything short of the hangman's noose, I reckon."

"Your belt, pardner," said Mr. Thompson, handing over that important piece of property, with a congratulatory smile upon his face the while. "I've heard tell of boxing, but I never saw it in perfection, until right now."

"The greater luck yours, then," curtly said Gentry, buckling the belt in place. "It's a brute's accomplishment, at best, and this—pah! It leaves a nasty taste in my mouth!"

Looking almost as much disgusted as though he had been vanquished in place of victor, Gentry ascended to the piazza, resuming his seat, gravely watching the little group about the fallen colossus.

Water and whisky quickly brought back those scattered senses, but it was some little time before Big Casino could fairly realize what had taken place. But when he did, instead of bursting into the angry roar which those who knew him best fully anticipated, he seemed completely cooled off, and even forced a sickly smile to his sorely bruised visage as one of his friends meekly asked if he was ready for another round?

"With you, dug-gun ye, ef ye think you've got any license to crow," he said, with a touch of his old time vigor, though he reeled like a drunken man as he painfully rose to his feet. "I kin lick you, an' all your 'lations, Hank Eberley, bunged up es I be, but not him—not any more Gentleman Joe in mine, I'm thankin' of ye all, gents!"

"That's white talk, and I'll cheerfully thrash any man who tries to rub it in deeper," sternly called forth the Gilt-Edged Sport, flashing a warning glance over the assembly. "Diamond's taken his lesson, and comes up after it like a man. That's let him out, so far as I'm concerned. But, and what I say, I'm more than ready to back up, remember, all: I've got another lesson just like that, for the one who thinks he can shame Daniel deeper by improving on his record."

There was a brief silence after this blunt speech. More than one of those within hearing were quite willing to see Gentleman Joe downed, and downed so hard that he would never rise of his own accord; but after the exhibition of skill just given, never a one of them all felt called to administer that downfall.

Big Casino gave a hoarse laugh at this, then said:

"Thar's dirt fer ye, in great gobs, bullies! Chaw yours, es I've done hed to chaw mine. An' now—business goes, I reckon!"

"Better take a little walk, fust, Dan'l," hastily cut in the city marshal, swinging that belt of arms behind himself, as though fearing an attempt to snatch them away, on the part of their owner. "You're too badly bunged up fer shootin', even ef 'twasn't clean ag'inst the law, an' so—"

"It's you that's showin' the fool, not me, Race," interrupted Big Casino, with a short laugh, as he picked up his hat and coat. "Jest keep your grub onto them guns, ontel I'm axin' fer 'em, will ye?"

"Am glad to see you're so mighty sensible, Dan'l, too!"

"'Twas driv' into me—jest hammered in, so to speak," gravely added the big fellow, putting on hat and coat, then fumbling in an inside pocket as his nearly closed eyes turned toward the hotel piazza.

He brought forth a crumpled envelope, and slowly approaching the steps, he doffed his hat, giving an awkward bow, and a scrape with one foot as he gravely spoke:

"Good-mornin', gents. Hope I see ye 'joyin' of yerselves this fine large mornin'. Kin ary one o' ye all d'reck me to whar I kin find a gent named Mr. Gentry, Esquire?"

"That's my name sir," answered Gentleman Joe, with difficulty suppressing a smile at that ridiculous exhibition

of elaborate politeness. "Can I serve you in any manner Mr. Diamond?"

"Jest es ef you hedn't s'arved me—proud to see ye Mr. Gentry Esquire," bowing lowly hat in hand. "I'd shorely knowed ye by yer extry fine looks but the pesky dust hes got into the both eyes o' me so pizen thick that I cain't see quite's well's usual."

A partly smothered chuckle came from some of the amused spectators, but Big Casino paid them no attention. Having taken his lesson in good manners he seemed bent on proving how well he had profited by that costly experience.

"No apologies, my dear sir," cordially said Gentleman Joe, really feeling something not far from akin to admiration for the fellow, even though knowing it was but outward respect he was showing. "If I can serve you in any way pray command me."

"Waal es fer s'arvin', sir, I wouldn't like to jest say I'm gwine fer to do jest that, but I hed a arr'nd guv me to kerry out an' hevin' tuck pay in advance reckon I'll hev to airn my wages. An'so—will ye be so kind es to condescend to stoop so low es to take this yer bit o' fasten'd up writin' sir?"

Bowing at each step taken Big Casino advanced near enough to give Gentleman Joe the soiled envelope, then backed away a bit, holding his hat in both hands before his breast, a faint grin coming into his battered countenance as he watched the effect of his errand.

Merely giving a glance at his name written in a bold hand on the back of the envelope Gentleman Joe tore it open and withdrew the inclosed sheet of note-paper.

It took but a few moments for his trained eyes to master the contents, which began with his name, ending with that of Frederick Jackson, with a curt alternative written between the two.

Gentry glanced over the sheet of paper, gazing at the bare-headed giant for an instant in silence, then asking:

"Did Lucky Jackson give you any hint as to what this envelope contained, Mr. Diamond?"

"Waal he kind o' let it drap that he was axin' ye to fight him a gun-fight or else git ready to shoot at sight, yes sir," bowed Daniel.

"He told you the truth as written here?" with a slight shake of the paper. "He says I can take my choice, but—hates to fight with a crippled man, even at his own invitation."

That grin was broadening upon Dan Diamond's face, but he had not forgotten his lesson in manners, and meekly asked:

"'Twon't be goin' ag'inst the law you read to me, boss, ef I was to drap a part o' this dug-gun perliteness, an' talk like I'm better used to doin', would it, now?"

"Certainly not, and I'd really like it better, too," admitted Gentleman Joe, with a low, amused laugh.

"Good enough, an' you're a mighty sight cleaner white then I ever thought I'd say to the bar' face o' ye, too!" declared the giant, with a long-drawn breath of relief.

"I can sincerely say the same, Diamond, and if you'd permitted your real nature to show itself before, all of this trouble would never have come up between us."

"Mebbe so, but that don't count, an' I do reckon Lucky's jest squirmen' on nettles over my makin' sech a turrible lengthy stay of it. An' so—fur's bein' a cripple goes, Lucky tole me to tell you, ef that ixcuse was fetched forward, not to worry your cabeza over that part of the business. He said he only needed one sound hand fer shootin', an' no matter which way you tuck his invite, you'd reckon he was the dug-gundest liveliest cripple you ever tackled afore the end come!"

"Then he is not simply bluffing, to cover up his defeat of last night?" soberly asked Gentry.

"He's dead sober airnest, boss, fer a fact," soberly declared the messenger. "He said ef you 'fused to meet him in a squar' gun-fight, 'cordin' to the rules an' regulations, that hed' begin shootin' on sight, with your heart fer his best target!"

"All right, then," with sudden energy. "Since he is so earnest about it, I'll meet him in a regular duel. I've sworn an oath to beat the gang calling themselves the Royal Flush, and I might as well take the Knave next, since I've already made a beginning with the ten-spot!"

"Which I'm kind o' wishin' you'd tackled t'other end fust, boss," almost dolefully observed Big Casino.

"Count yourslef lucky in getting of with as light punishment, sir," sternly retorted the Gilt Edged Sport, then rising from the chair which he had occupied throughout that conversation, moving to the edge off the piazza, glancing toward the city marshal as he spoke:

"May I have a word or two with you, on this subject, Mr. Eagle?"

"More'n that, ef they kin s'arve ye, Gentry," came the prompt reply.

"Thanks. I felt tolerably certain I might count upon your friendship, Race. Now, please restore this gentleman's property, will you?"

"Which I'm tryin' to hope you won't make no worse use of it then I hev, Dan'l," gravely observed the marshal, as he complied.

"Sence lyin's shet down on in this comp'ny, Race, reckon mebbe I hedn't best make no rash promises," grinned the giant, as he fastened the belt around his middle. "But thar's one thing you kin 'pend onto—I hain't gwine to buckle up ag'inst Gentleman Joe—not ontel my eyes gits shet o' this pesky dust, anyhow."

"Nor then, I'm hoping, Diamond," said Gentry, with almost cordiality. "You've shown that you can be white, if you like; why not keep on in the good trail?"

"Mebbe I will, ef I don't slip up onto it, boss," with a half-sheepish grin coming into his battered countenance. "But you wanted to hev a chin-chin 'long of the marshal, an' so I'll jest—"

"Wait a moment longer, please, for I may have a word or two to send back by you, in answer to this very pretty invitation," said Gentry, then turning toward the marshal and Mr. Thompson, both of whom now stood near by: "Please read this note, Eagle, then say if you'll act as my second, in connection with my friend Thompson, here."

Both men eagerly read the curt note, and Mr. Thompson at once gave his hearty assent to acting as second in the proposed duel, but Eagle took quite a different view of the matter.

"I'm sot up hyar 'in town, sir, as a repersentative of law an' order. It's my sworn duty fer to shet down on all fights, no matter—"

"Within your jurisdiction, which is limited to the town itself, old friend," interrupted Gentleman Joe, with a half-frown. "And because I'd be brought into conflict with you and your oath, Eagle, I'm asking you to back me up in this duel."

"But, man, dear."

"Because, if I can't have seconds I know I can fully depend upon, I'll take the chances of a street-fight in preference. Would that suit your ideas any better, marshal?"

Horace Eagle protruded his long chin to meet his fingers, scratching that organ perplexedly. This was a new view of the matter, and he was hardly ready to meet it.

"The fight's bound to come off, unless Jackson gives leg-bail, so why not have it according to rule. You'll stand by me! Good enough!" and his hand gripped that of the marshal, shaking it warmly as he added, "You and Thompson, here, go make all arrangements. Outside of town, of course, and with revolvers. Settle the rest to suit yourselves."

CHAPTER XIII.

COMING TO TERMS.

Gentleman Joe spoke rapidly, like one taking everything for granted, yet unwilling to leave an opening large enough for a counter remark to be slipped in.

He would have been blind, indeed, had he not seen by the worthy marshal's countenance, how strongly Horace Eagle was opposed to this idea, but without pausing for reply or remonstrance, Gentry turned toward Big Casino, who still stood in waiting, hat in hand.

"Where can Lucky Jackson be found, Diamond?"

"Thar at the bosse's house, I reckon, sir."

"Very well. You have performed his errand, now oblige me by attending to mine. Go back to the one who sent you here, and tell him I'll strain a few points, and treat him as I might a gentleman. Since he's so set on having a fight, I'll send my friends to consult with his."

"Any more, boss?"

"Nothing more for you, Diamond."

Big Casino gave another bow and scrape, grinning as though he began to find an unexpected pleasure in his newly gained accomplishments, then turned away, hat cocked at a defiant angle, nose and chin in air, every motion giving grim defiance to the crowd through which he was passing just then.

"Gentleman Joe's one thing, but the likes o' you critters is mighty sight dif'rent," he said, once more the overbearing bully. "Ef ary one to a dozen o' ye reckon ye kin rub in what he put on, come an' see me with the say-so."

But neither hand nor word was ready to bar his passage, and once beyond that gathering, the bruised and battered giant hurried along, seemingly eager to perform his return errand.

"Tain't right, nur I cain't help tellin' ye that way, nuthér," said Horace Eagle, as Gentleman Joe once more turned his way. "It's bad 'nough to git into a mix with sech pizen critters as Lucky, but when it comes to liftin' him to a level 'long with a white gentleman that's more'n foolish."

"You read his note, and heard what Big Casino said, pardner," came the grave response. "How much better would it be to take chances in a street-fight, where the worst sufferers are almost always innocent people?"

"He'd never resk it—never. With all his luck, he hain't sech a blind-eyed critter as to buck ag'inst you on the level, Joe."

"That's the principal reason I've picked you two true friends to see me out," said Gentry, with a bright smile, as he glanced from face to face, then reached out a hand to each of those friends. "All I ask of the Royal Flush, from top card to bottom, is fair play and an even chance, and so much I know you'll secure me."

"But the bar' idee of—"

"Is by far the best left open under the circumstances," interposed Mr. Thompson, with a nervous glance toward the eagerly waiting crowd. "I, for one, will give you my heartiest support, Mr. Gentry, but don't you reckon we'd better adjourn to some less public place?"

Gentleman Joe gave a low, easy laugh, as he glanced over those interested faces, then spoke to the gathering:

"Have patience, friends, and you shall have as much of the sport as we can spare you. If anything amusing comes of this war of words, be sure you'll receive an invitation, and every one of you shall have a front seat. Now, please excuse us for a few moments, will you?"

A lusty cheer greeted this speech, and the Gilt-Edged Sport smiled again, as he turned to enter the hotel with his seconds.

"Nothing like keeping in touch with the crowd, gentlemen. If they aren't with you, be sure they're against you, and that makes a mighty awkward handicap."

Although every word so far spoken by the city marshal had been in oppositon to a duel, he had been so adroitly drawn into the affair by Gentleman Joe that now he found retreat hardly practicable.

Mr. Thompson, on the contrary, appeared very well pleased with the situation as far as it had gone, and more than willing to help it along to the natural ending.

"Why not, since it's got to come to a head, sooner or later?" he volunteered, like one who feels his eagerness may be awkwardly interpreted. "And a regular meeting, where all points are measured according to rule, with penalty ready, surely is better than a hap-hazard duel on the fly, with who knows how many enemies ready for a snap-shot?"

"Your points are mine, Thompson," bowed Gentry; "but the time for argument has long gone by. The main thing now is to settle terms."

"Being the party challenged, you've the right to dictate them, of course, Mr. Gentry."

"I'm only asking a fair shake, and one adversary at a time. You can give or take a little, rather than have any delay or balk, but I'd suggest revolvers, fifty yards apart, to hold fire until after the word, then go-as-you-please."

"Ef that satisfies you, we hain't no right to kick, Gentry, only I wish—"

"Twas bound to come, old friend, and why not right now? Either I'll beat the Royal Flush, or they'll beat me."

There's been too many ugly words, hints, insinuations flung broadcast for this section to give us all shelter. So—I'll begin with Lucky Jackson."

After a few more words, Gentleman Joe passed up stairs to his room, while his seconds left the hotel, heading for the King residence, where final terms were to be made.

"I've got to tote my sheer, reckon," grumbled Horace Eagle, while on their way; "but I cain't say when I've done it so clean ag'inst the good-will o' me. The idee! Sech a clean-white gent as him stoopin' so low as to give a-meetin' to Lucky Jackson."

A snort of supreme disgust followed that ejaculation, and the city marshal's face would have delighted a caricaturist just then.

Mr. Thompson had very little to say, and his manner was prudently non-committal. Though he endeavored to seem coolly composed, a keen observer would have seen his mind was far from being wholly at ease.

There was no difficulty experienced in gaining admittance to that usually seclusive residence, for, as they came in sight of the house, both gentlemen noticed two figures seated upon the piazza, and Eagle gave a warning growl to his companion:

"Look at 'em, will ye? Couple o' spiders, waitin' fer a blue-bottle fly to fight over—dug-gun 'em."

"If we're ther flies, I reckon they'll find we carry stings," Mr. Thompson said, with a short, nervous chuckle.

As they entered the yard, the King brothers rose to their feet, gravely saluting the comers, and Asa King politely inquiring:

"How can we serve you, gentlemen?"

"Whar's Lucky Jackson?" gruffly asked the city marshal.

"Inside. Do you wish to see him, sir?"

"Oh, climb down! Whar's the blame use in sech durn foolishin', King?" impatiently spoke Eagle. "I reckon you know what sort o' word Jackson sent Gentry by Big Casino, an' we've come hyar to fix matters up, one way or t'other."

"There's only one way they can be fixed up, so far as Lucky is concerned," broke in Tom King, less cool than his brother.

"Then that's the way we're looking for, gentlemen," said Thompson, mounting the steps. "Please show us in to Mr. Jackson, and we'll get through with the job as quickly as may be."

His back was turned toward Horace Eagle, since he was first to put foot upon the low flight of steps, hence only those for whom 'twas intended, caught the full meaning of that significant wink. Yet, as though to make assurance doubly certain, Mr. Thompson added in lighter tones:

"Didn't Big Casino tell you what happened, gentlemen?"

"All we cared particularly to hear, yes," bowed Ace King, coldly.

Mr. Thompson gave a breath of relief, and from that time on to the end of their call, he seemed much more at ease in his mind.

The chief of the Royal Flush led the way into the room where Mr. Thompson had been given one important interview, and where the remainder of the dangerous five were waiting their coming.

Queen Esther gave a sweeping courtesy, Big Casino an awkward nod, Lucky Jackson one of his frozen smiles, all of which were acknowledged in due form by the representatives of Gentleman Joe.

Considering the matter which they had met to discuss, all hands were almost painfully polite, and for the first few minutes neither side appeared willing to speak with anything like freedom.

Lucky Jackson was the one to break that awkward spell, which he did with a vigorous oath, then hastily bowing toward his mistress, with:

"Beg pardon, Queen, but I really couldn't help it. Business is business, and the sooner we get it through the better my hand'll feel."

"An' that hits me right whar I feel most at home," declared Horace Eagle, flinging aside his polite shackles, and permitting his natural humor to resume its sway. "I hated to come into this mix, bein' as I'm sworn down to keep the peace furs' I kin, but now I'm thar, I'm fer gittin' out jest as sudden as I know how."

"I'll meet you at the half-way mark, never fear, Eagle," grimly retorted Jackson. "All I ask for is a square chance to get even for a cowardly blow, and—"

"Just hold your hush for a bit, Lucky," interposed Ace King. "You placed yourself in my hands, and I'll do the talking for our side. Now, which one of you gentlemen carries the word?"

"Ary one, but mebbe you kin sling it out the slickest, pardner," said Eagle, giving Mr. Thompson a curt nod.

"That will call for very few words, I imagine, Mr. King," with a polite bow. "Mr. Jackson demands a duel, or a street-fight. Our principal, Mr. Gentry, believes it best to avoid risk of harming innocent parties, and for that reason he consents to meet your friend, according to rule."

"Of course, he authorized you gentlemen to arrange all terms?"

"Certainly. Mr. Jackson pointedly instructed his messenger to say that he only required one hand to do his shooting with. Hence no objection can be raised to the weapons chosen by Mr. Gentry; revolvers, the distance to be fifty yards, and—"

"Only fifty yards?" sneeringly asked King.

"Only fifty yards to start with," smilingly bowed Mr. Thompson. "But there's no bar up against Mr. Jackson's shortening that distance as much as he pleases, or can after the word is given."

"Agree to that, King," curtly spoke up the wounded gambler.

"Very well, the distance is settled. What else, sir?"

"The word to be tossed for. When spoken, both parties to fire at will, until one or the other is downed, or both guns are empty. In case neither man is killed, another round is to be granted, if either principal demands the privilege."

"That is hardly likely to happen, but let the agreement stand that way, if you prefer. When and where is it to come off?"

"That Mr. Gentry is willing you should determine to suit yourselves," politely bowed Mr. Thompson.

"The quicker the better I'll be suited," said Jackson.

"Don't let 'em make me wait until the fever in this hand unsteadies my other."

"How will this afternoon, at four o'clock, suit your views, then?"

That point was promptly agreed to, then Lucky Jackson stated that the brothers King would act as his seconds, at which Horace Eagle once more saw fit to insert a pointed word or two:

"That's all right, an' we're not kickin'. Only—jest by way of leavin' no room fer wuss trouble, ye mind, an' not even hintin' at sech a idee on your side, gents. Only, I say, thar mustn't come no outside nonsense from one side n'r the other."

"What do you mean by that, sir?" sternly demanded Ace King.

"Jest what I say, Ace. I cain't stop the row, sence it's to come off outside the city limits. Out thar, I cain't act as marshal, fer the law won't stretch that fur. But I kin act as a man, an' ef thar's ary show of foul play, I'll git to the rights of it, or lose my office."

"If foul play comes, 'twill be from your backing," sternly cried the injured gambler, his blue eyes glittering hotly. "Joe Gentry has marked me, as he might mark a stray hog, and now I'll mark him—for the grave."

Mr. Thompson rose to his feet, with a grave bow, then said:

"Since we have come to terms, our mission is at an end. Permit us to wish you good-day, and take our leave. Come, Mr. Eagle."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE COMBINATION FAILED.

In his eagerness to avoid what promised to become another quarrel, Mr. Thompson had overlooked one important point; but before they left the building, the spot where the duel was to take place was fully understood by both parties.

As a matter of course, where so many ears had caught the meaning of that oddly delivered note, long before the

final arrangements were completed, all Hardscrabble knew a duel was on the tapis, and an eager crowd gathered about the Occidental Hotel, waiting and watching, feeling sure they could not be cheated out of their share, so long as they kept range of one of the principals.

Gentleman Joe received his seconds, and listened approvingly to their report. Then, with a grim smile upon his handsome face, he passed out to the hotel piazza, lifting a hand to check the wild cheer which greeted his coming.

When silence was restored, the Gilt-Edged Sport briefly told them the conclusion reached, naming hour and place, ending by inviting one and all to be on hand for the little circus.

"The more the better, gentlemen," he said, in conclusion, his voice fully as serious as was his face just then. "Because I want no man to have even the ghost of an excuse to fling out a nasty sneer at my expense. If I am about to fight a wounded man, 'tis simply because he would have it so, distinctly declaring that he does not consider himself handicapped in the least by that injury to his left hand.

Even without this frank invitation, the crowd would surely have been on hand, but possibly the speech was not entirely wasted, judging from the hearty cheers which greeted Gentleman Joe, when, in company with his seconds, he appeared upon the ground selected.

Only a few seconds later, another united cheer announced the coming of the Royal Flush; literally that, since even Queen Esther was with them, her face heavily veiled, but her identity unmistakable.

Gentleman Joe smiled grimly as he saw this, but, if his words were sincere, he did not regret that coming.

"So much the better, friends," he said to his seconds. "If they really meant crooked work, be sure they'd never fetch the madam along to share the risk."

Mr. Thompson turned abruptly away, possibly to hide the curious twitching which disturbed his beard, near his lips, but Mr. Eagle only grunted forth his indifference.

"Ef she kin stand it, reckon we kin, pardner."

Gentleman Joe, rather against the strict code, yielded so far to his natural sense of courtesy, as to approach his opponent and party, bowing respectfully to the lady, then to her companions, saying:

"I could wish our meeting to be under more agreeable circumstances, perhaps, but I'm glad to see you, one and all."

Cold bows alone answered him, and Gentleman Joe turned away, leaving his seconds to complete the arrangements to their liking.

The ground was measured off, and the eager crowd warned to act accordingly. A wide lane was quickly formed, a coin being tossed for choice of position, and for the word.

Eagle won the first, and Ace King the second.

Gentleman Joe quietly moved toward the point nearest him, leaving Lucky Jackson to take the other, taking out his pistols for a precautionary inspection, while the city marshal was laying down the law, from a point nearly midway between the two stations.

"While I was hard-sot ag'inst ary sech bloody murder doin's as this yer, gentlemen all, from the word go," his stern voice rung forth, "sence I couldn't hope to hender, I'm still harder sot on hev'n a dead squar' deal all 'round.

"Fust place, let everybody know jest what the tarms is: fifty yards apart, ontel the word is given, each man to use the guns he feels like handlin', jest so—he only has made six at a time. When the word is once giv', it's shoot as they feel like it, eyther from the mark, or on the jump to git shorter range, jest as seems best. Hev I stated the tarms fairly, Mr. King?"

"With the single exception that I am to give the word, which will be like this: 'Are you ready?' If each principal says yes, then I'm to add: 'Fire—go.'"

"Straight as a string, an' I 'cept the 'mendment," bowed Eagle, with grave politeness. "But jest one word funder, all. This is to be a clean-cut, up-an'-down-squar' fight, no matter which side gits the wust of it all. Ef ary friend to him as goes down, tries to chip in, I pledge my word o' honor as a white man to kill him, ef he can't kill me fust."

"Is that meant as a slur against the side I represent, marshal?"

"Not unless your side desaves it, Mr. King. I said ary pusson, an' I meant to take in every critter who's inside o' my voice. Ef I hed a own brother who was devil 'nough fer to break over these rules, I'd shoot him like the cur he played."

A cheer greeted this determined speech, and, bowing his thanks, Horace Eagle drew nearer his principal, who had already taken his position as marked out for him, but who quietly stepped to one side as he spoke in tones loud enough for all present to catch:

"Will you be so kind as to lend me one of your guns, Mr. Eagle? I find, on examination, that an accident has happened to both of mine."

For a single breath an almost painful silence reigned throughout that assembly, each man casting swift glances toward his neighbors, then looking with breathless interest at the principals in that affair.

Coming as it did, that cold, stern announcement seemed to threaten still worse trouble than a mere duel between two men.

Horace Eagle started as though shot, and his hands mechanically fell upon the butts of his pistols like one who expects hot work to come, yet hardly knowing in what direction to look for it.

Mr. Thompson gave a half-smothered exclamation, and had any one been watching him particularly, they might have caught ugly suspicions from his agitated demeanor.

But no eyes were turned that way, so far as the stranger was concerned, and, if he really felt such alarm, Mr. Thompson was given time enough to recover his nerves and wits.

Gentleman Joe, despite his seeming calmness, was very pale just then, and if any one had been cool enough to take critical notes, they might have seen his sudden change of position had brought his body in line with a part of the crowd, so far as the members of the Royal Flush were concerned.

"What's broken loose now?" sternly called out Ace King, taking a few steps that way.

"Just what I said, Mr. King," coldly answered the Gilt-Edged Sport. "My guns are disabled, and so much so that I'd be worse than an idiot to risk my sweet life upon either one of them."

"Disabled! Isn't it rather late in the day to make such a discovery as that?" sneeringly cried the chief of the Flush.

"I consider myself in big luck that I found it out this early, sir, since you take that tone."

"Do you dare insinuate that I—that any of us had aught to do with the job, then?" came the fierce demand.

"Steady, thar!" sternly commanded Horace Eagle, his pistols coming forth in readiness for action in case of need. "Keep your places, every soul o' ye. This yer's got to be squared, fust of all."

"Answer me, Mr. Gentry," persisted Ace King, but without touching a weapon as yet. "Do you accuse our side of crooked work?"

"I accuse no person—as yet," came the steady reply. "I simply make the bare fact known. My guns are out of order, and——"

"Oh, why don't somebody kick!" came a clear, derisive voice, surely that of a woman. "I thought this was to be a shooting-match, not a game of back down."

"Quiet, Queen."

"Your servant, madam," bowed Gentleman Joe, toward that veiled shape. "Sorry to keep your ladyship waiting, but——"

"Talk to me, since talking seems to be your best holt, Gentry," Ace King once more interposed. "Are you trying to crawl out at such a convenient hole? If so, why not say it in plain words?"

"Because that would be a lie, and I leave all such tricks to the same ones who took the trouble to bend each foresight on my guns, so they'd throw fully three feet to the right at fifty yards."

"If you mean to even hint——"

"I'm making no hints, I tell you for the last time, Mr. King. If I pull safely through this little shooting-match, I'll look deeper into this affair, but just now I claim the

rights given me by the terms Mr. Eagle made known only a short time since—the right to use whatever revolver best suits my taste.”

“It’s a put-up job from start to finish,” angrily exploded Lucky Jackson, who still stood at his assigned position. “How could a man’s guns get so out of order without his knowing it?”

“That remains for the future to answer, sir, and I claim the privilege; have I that right, marshal?”

“You shorely hev, sir,” came the prompt response, as Eagle stepped forward, reversing one of his revolvers, and offering its butt to the Gilt-Edged Sport. “Hyar’s mine, give me yours, please.”

While that exchange was being effected, Ace King hurried back to where Lucky Jackson was standing, but even while under such strong excitement he carefully avoided giving excuse for a call of foul play. He held both hands in fair sight, and did not stand close enough to his principal for an extra weapon to be transferred by either man.

Holding the pistol taken in exchange for his own, Gentleman Joe stood at his mark, calmly waiting the pleasure of the other side.

Such an important discovery, delayed as it was until almost too late for rectification would have shattered the nerves of almost any ordinary man, but the Gilt-Edged Sport showed not the slightest trace of nervousness, so far as could be seen by those who watched him then.

As for Mr. Thompson, he had drawn back until close to the crowd at a point a little in the rear of his principal, standing with pistol in hand, which fact alone marked him as one of the party most interested.

Ace King did not linger long in consultation with his principal, but retracing his steps to a position nearly midway between the duelists, he once more spoke to Gentleman Joe, saying coldly:

“Once more, Mr. Gentry; do you charge us with fraud in this ugly affair?”

“Not you—directly, sir.”

“If you mean to even hint——”

“I never indulge in hinting, sir. If you really wish it, I’ll see you later, but just now my attention is due Lucky Jackson. You have the word, I believe? Then, let us have it as well.”

“I’ll remind you of that promise, sir, never fear, if you’re in condition to receive it,” coldly bowed Ace King, then facing the center line, lifting his right hand, made more conspicuous by the white handkerchief gripped by his fingers.

There was a brief pause, almost breathless so far as the eagerly waiting crowd was concerned, then his clear, sharp voice rung forth:

“Are you ready, gentlemen?”

“Ready.”

“And waiting.”

As they gave this answer, the duelists stood keenly alert, and, after a single breath, Ace King cried aloud:

“Ready—go!”

The words were still upon his lips when Lucky Jackson flung forward his pistol-hand, shooting on the instant, for he was a snap-shot, pure and simple. And almost like its echo, came the explosion of Gentleman Joe’s gun.

He was even quicker than Lucky Jackson in lifting his weapon, but he took time for a sure, though marvelously quick aim, stepping quickly to one side, in order to clear the smoke from that single discharge.

It was only a single shot, too.

With a wild scream of pain and baffled fury, Lucky Jackson dropped his gun, staggering back and inside, his white-banded hand flying around to catch his right arm, now swaying helplessly by his side.

“Hold, play fair!” screamed Tom King, springing toward his principal, who was clearly disabled. “My man’s got it—hard.”

And he spoke no more than the simple truth. That shot had shattered Jackson’s right elbow, and, before King could reach his side, he sank to the earth, fainting with pain and choking rage.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. THOMPSON TAKES A HINT.

Until the signal was given and the first shot fired, Horace Eagle kept close watch upon those he rightly considered the enemy, but when Lucky Jackson pulled trigger for his snap-shot, the lead itself was hardly swifter than the eyes of the worthy marshal, whose pent-up breath came sharply as he saw Gentleman Joe showed no signs of being harmed.

Then, when the unfortunate gambler reeled in his agony, to fall in a nerveless heap before Tom King could get there to break his fall, the marshal cried aloud in stern warning:

“Stiddy, all! Keep back, you critters, out o’ line.”

His warning came none too soon. Moved by the curious impulse which seems to urge all human beings to close in around a public sufferer, the spectators were beginning to surge forward, all eyes for the moment turned toward the fallen duelist.

“All eyes open, Gentry,” added Horace Eagle, with a touch of anxiety in his voice. “It’s go-as-you-please, member, old rocks.”

“I’m ready, and waiting, pardner,” came the cool response; “but I fancy Mr. Jackson has pretty much all he cares for so soon.”

The Gilt-Edged Sport knew how surely his lead had gone to the mark his eye had singled out. With his own guns, whose slightest peculiarities he knew as surely as a fond parent knows a favorite child, he would never have doubted the result at that distance. As it was, he asked only for the one glance taken before the ball of smoke from his weapon had time to scatter.

That helplessly dropping arm told the plain tale, and with a cold, set smile upon his handsome face, Gentleman Joe waited for the next move in the game.

Ace King held his station, nearly midway between the marks scored for the principals, a pistol drawn, but his eyes turned toward his twin brother, who was bending over the prostrate duelist.

Queen Esther moved in that direction, but a warning sound from the lips of her husband held her back, until the result was placed beyond all doubt.

As for Mr. Thompson, he likewise retained the position he had elected for himself, but his face bore an anxious look, hardly in keeping with his office. Had his friend fallen, instead of his enemy, he could hardly have looked more uneasy in mind.

“What’s the word, Ace?” called out Eagle, impatiently. “Eyther throw up the sponge, or tell Tom to skin out o’ that in a holy hurry, too.”

“Grant them time, Mr. Eagle,” coolly spoke up Gentleman Joe from his station. “I came here at their invitation, and my time is theirs, until they say they’ve had all they want of my company.”

It was a palpable bid for popular approval, but there was nothing in the Western code against it, and Gentleman Joe knew that the battle between himself and the Royal Flush had only begun.

The public would surely take sides, and if his could be made the popular one, so much the better for himself and his friends.

Ace King was smart enough to realize all this, but the little trick was turned before he could trump it.

“What’s the best word, Tom?” he called out, sharply, to his brother. “Gentry’s growing weak in the knees with suspense, he says.”

“No best word about it,” harshly called back his twin. “The jig’s up. Lucky’s caught it in the elbow, and he can’t handle a gun with his feet, I reckon?”

Ace King echoed back the vicious oath with which that harsh admission of defeat was made, his face darker than ever as he turned to flash a look upon the victor, then at Eagle.

“You hear both? Jackson’s crippled, and can’t come to time.”

“I’m sorry to hear it—most powerful sorry,” declared the city marshal, but with a broad grin coming into his face which gave those words a flat denial. “Then, I reckon, the show’s over, Ace?”

"For the present, at least," bowed King, turning abruptly away, making for the side of his doubly injured principal.

"Shet up, you 'tarnal critters," fairly howled the delighted marshal, as a few of the spectators gave a cheer for the winning side. "Them as crow over a man that's fell down right afore his own face is wuss then wilted pussley. Go whar Lucky cain't ketch—good Lawd! I'd give my Sunday boots, ef I hed a bar'l big 'nough to smother my hollerin' into my own durn fool' self."

He put up his pistol while spluttering forth these words, and then, with eager hands extended, he rushed to give Gentleman Joe his congratulations on the happy result of that trial.

"Shake, Josey, an' then do it ag'in," he cried, seemingly beside himself with joyful excitement. "I couldn't feel happier'n I be right now, ef I was ketched huggin' a rich, purty, fat young widder up tight into a dark corner. No, I jest couldn't, now."

Laughing easily at this honest enthusiasm, Gentleman Joe gave both hands to Horace Eagle, returning his grip and meeting that pump-handle shake half-way.

Mr. Thompson likewise put up his gun, now that the affair had come to an ending, and, with a forced smile upon his bearded face, stepped forward to add his congratulations to those of his fellow-second.

"Although I can't hope to express my pleasure quite so gracefully as my colleague has done, Mr. Gentry, I'm never a whit the less thoroughly delighted with this outcome," he said, with words almost as artificial as that smile.

But his manner of reception was vastly different from the one given Horace Eagle. Gentleman Joe turned his face in that direction, but with the smile fading out of his face, a cold, hard glitter leaping into the eyes which had beamed laughingly upon the marshal.

Mr. Thompson stood with extended hand, but the Gilt-Edged Sport made no move toward accepting it, even after he dropped the hands of his other second.

A little murmur ran through those of the crowd who had not turned toward the fallen duelist. Even the most obtuse among them could not help seeing something was going wrong in this quarter.

Mr. Thompson surely began to realize that same fact, for his voice lowered and caught a little quaver, as he repeated:

"I congratulate you, Mr. Gentry, on the——"

"I don't know you, sir," coldly interrupted Gentleman Joe staring coldly into that face the while.

"But—I mean——"

"I don't know you, sir," pitilessly, repeated the Gilt-Edged Sport.

Mr. Thompson recoiled, his hand falling, his figure shrinking like one who looks for a blow to follow hard words. But then, rallying, he made yet another effort to retrieve himself.

"I didn't look for such a reception as this, sir, after all I've done for——"

"It's because you've done too mighty much, that you get this reception," almost harshly cut in the other.

"Oh, I say!" interfered Horace Eagle, his honest face showing both anxiety and embarrassment. "Thar shorely cain't be—don't come to blows atwixt our own selves, gents, I beg o' ye, now."

"There's no cause to worry, pardner," grimly assured his principal. "My eyes are fairly open, now, and my back is not turned."

Mr. Thompson gave an angry gesture, his voice turned harshly stern, as he cried out:

"You don't—what do you mean, Mr. Gentry?"

"If you prefer my meaning put into another shape, I can't afford to know you, Mr. Thompson."

"You surely can't—is this meant for an insult, sir?"

Gentleman Joe seemed to grow colder as his present adversary waxed warmer. A low, contemptuous laugh came from his lips, and they curled a bit more than nature intended, while his glittering eyes slowly moved over the stranger's figure down, then back to pause at his face.

Clear and cutting came his next words, amply loud enough for the interested witnesses to catch and comprehend.

"Am I trying to insult you, you ask, Mr. Thompson? Well, hardly that. Some persons are below insult, even as a few others are above it. You can choose for yourself, for all I care, but I'll give you a cue as to my real opinion; both of my guns were maliciously crippled this day."

"Do you actually mean to hint that I crippled them, sir?" hoarsely demanded Thompson, his right hand dropping to one of his own pistols.

"Don't try to draw that gun, Mr. Thompson," sternly cried Gentry. "Remember, I'm still carrying one that's straight in the sights."

There was no empty threat in that warning, and, with a surly growl, the stranger withdrew his hand, and Gentleman Joe added:

"This is what I mean, boiled down to a point, sir. You and I were the only persons who touched my guns this day. They were all right when I got out of bed this morning. They have been tampered with, as I stand ready to prove before impartial judges, if you care to put it to the test."

"On my word of honor, sir, I never——"

"One who would turn such a dirty trick would lie about it as a matter of course. Both sights are bent so as to throw lead to the right. An accident might possibly have injured one, but never both, and that in precisely the same manner, and to the same extent."

"When I gave Big Casino his lesson to-day, I gave my belt of arms to you for safe keeping. Only your hands and mine have touched either gun this day. I surely didn't disable them. Then—who did the foul trick?"

"If done at all, sir, 'twas not me," declared Mr. Thompson, with a fine show of injured dignity, but Gentleman Joe simply said:

"You hold both guns, Mr. Eagle. If you care to take the trouble, you can show this person the marks of pliers on the fore-sights."

"Ef thar is sech, an' he cain't disprove it, I'll——"

"You'll oblige me by keeping hands off, pardner. As for you, Mr. Thompson, if you care to press this point farther, you know where to find me."

With those curt words, Gentleman Joe turned away, passing over to where Asa King stood near the crippled gambler.

Touching his hat, with a slight bow, the Gilt-Edged Sport asked:

"Are You satisfied with the way matters have gone, Mr. King?"

"For the present, yes," came the gruff response.

"Then, I'll bid you good-day. If I'm wanted for anything farther, a message or a call at the Occidental will always find me."

That polite tone was worse than rudeness to the proud man who received it, but what could he do? All had been conducted strictly according to the arrangements openly made, and he forced himself to bide his time, merely giving a nod in answer to the bow Gentleman Joe made in taking his departure.

"How is it, Purcell?" King asked the doctor, who had already completed a hasty examination of the injury.

"Bad enough, sir, though it might have been worse. The joint is hopelessly shattered, and only amputation——"

"I'll die, first," hoarsely cried Jackson, having rallied sufficiently to catch that dread verdict. "Crippled! Crippled in both hand and arm. Where is the devil who——"

"Your only hope of saving the member lies in keeping quiet, Mr. Jackson," hastily said the doctor, a gentle hand touching the maddened wretch's chest, restraining his rash attempt to gain his feet.

"Save it, doc, and I'll be your slave! Only—didn't I hit him, Ace? Surely I hit him? Say that I—he didn't get clear to crow over me, man, dear?"

"Of course you hit him, and mighty hard, too," soothingly spoke the medical man, with an anxious wink toward the brothers, then adding: "We must carry you to some place better adapted to work than this, though."

"To my house, of course," said Ace King. "Rig up a litter of some sort, Tom, for—ha!" as he caught sight of Big Casino, coming forward with a door balanced across his broad shoulders. "The very thing."

Partly comforted by the assurance that he had not

thrown his lead away, Lucky Jackson submitted to being wrapped up in a coat, then placed upon the door, which was carefully lifted with its groaning burden, and borne away in the direction of the town.

The distance was not great, since a spot had been chosen south of Hardscrabble, on which side of the mining-camp the King residence stood; but that journey, brief though it was, proved a torturing one to the unlucky "Lucky" Jackson.

As yet nothing had been done to his arm, save to bind it tightly above the wound, to partially check the flow of blood. And carefully though his bearers proceeded, each slight jar or shake caused Jackson exquisite torture as the ends of the shattered bones grated together.

Asa King and Queen Esther hastened on in advance, to prepare for that sad home-coming, so different from the one they had anticipated with such fierce glee, only an hour or two before.

Mr. Thompson, deserted by those who had so recently called him friend, "flocked to himself" for a short time, seemingly at a loss just what course to pursue. But when that groaning burden was picked up, his determination was taken, and, falling in behind the little group, he bore them company to the house.

When it was reached preliminary preparations had been made for the reception of the wounded gambler; if Mr. Thompson was noticed at all, nothing was said to him, and no attempt was made to hinder his entrance with the rest.

As though he had some doubts on that score, he had taken hold of the door, helping it up the steps and through the front entrance.

For the present, Jackson was lowered to the floor in one of the lower rooms, where Dr. Purcell set about attending to his hurt, bidding King clear the room of all unnecessary witnesses.

Jackson rallied as he came to a rest, and, catching sight of Mr. Thompson's face among others, he hoarsely cried out:

"Kill that devil! Kill him, I say! He put up the job, and brought all this trouble upon me—curse him from top to toe."

CHAPTER XVI.

HATCHING ANOTHER SCHEME.

Swift glances passed between husband and wife at this savage outburst, and Asa King made a covert sign, which was promptly acted upon.

Queen Esther approached the shrinking stranger, a peculiar gleam in her dark eyes, and meekly yielding to her touch, Mr. Thompson passed out of that room in her company.

"I'm mighty sorry the combination failed, madam," he said, huskily, as they entered another apartment, across the hall. "If for nothing else, because now it's a fight to the very death between us and Joe Gentry."

"Take a seat, please," coldly spoke the Queen, with a wave of a hand toward one standing near the opposite side of the room. "I'm not prepared to talk about this nasty affair just now. Wait until Mr. King can come to us."

That next hour could hardly have been an agreeable one to Mr. Thompson, but he showed no outward signs of uneasiness, even though Queen Esther, from her station near the door, plainly considered herself his guard.

At the end of that period, the brothers came into the room, and in answer to Queen Esther's look of inquiry, Ace King said:

"Purcell says it'll have to come off to save Jackson's life, but as Lucky kicked so fierce against it, we've agreed to wait at least until to-morrow."

"I heard you take him up stairs. Who is with him now?"

"Doc and Casino. They'll care for him, until we can make final arrangements."

"One of which is—what about Mr. Thompson yonder?"

"You're looking on me with suspicion, madam, but you do me great wrong," earnestly broke in that gentleman. "I faithfully carried out my part of the scheme, as you surely heard, when—"

"I know that Gentleman Joe used a gun with perfectly straight sights," sharply interrupted Queen Esther.

"Easy, girl," gravely warned her husband, taking a chair. "I heard more than you, perhaps, and from the way Gentry rubbed in the dirt, it hardly looks reasonable that Thompson was playing in with him."

"I thank you for that, Mr. King, and if you'll only hear me out, I'll agree to prove my honesty. I doctored his guns, just as I said I could and would. Big Casino can vouch for the long risks I took in doing so, too, for 'twas done while Gentry was in open sight."

"How did Gentry find it out in time, though?" persisted the woman.

"Because I bent them too far out of plumb, I suppose," with a half, sheepish echo to his words. "But I wanted to make sure for our side, and then, too, I had to work in a hurry and under difficulties, if you'll only take trouble to think it all over."

"Well, it proved a fizzle, and Gentry got there," gruffly observed Tom King. "Of course, he'll lay it all at our door, and we've got to down him, or own up beaten; which?"

"Never the last, with my consent," flashed Queen Esther, sternly.

"If you'll agree to trust me once more, I'll prove my honesty, gentlemen, and put Gentry into your hands to deal with as you like best."

"How do you propose to do that, Thompson?"

"I'll arrest Gentleman Joe on a trumped up charge of murder, or any big crime, if you'll agree to take him off my hands, when once helpless to defend himself," declared the other, with a short, ugly chuckle.

The members of the Royal Flush interchanged glances which were almost startled, but then Ace King asked:

"Talk's easy, pardner, but—how can you turn that trick?"

"Easily enough, if you can help me over a single difficulty. Give me the necessary legal blanks—I'll fill them out in proper shape, and never leave an opening for a plausible kick—and I'll arrest Joseph Gentry as a fugitive from justice."

"Can't it be done without going to all that trouble, though?" asked Ace King, whom the audacious scheme appeared to strike quite favorably, risky though it surely was.

"It might, but I'd rather have the documents in proper order. With them to help throw dust into the eyes of Horace Eagle, I'll agree to make the city marshal act as my deputy, even so far as helping me escort Gentleman Joe out of Hardscrabble."

"If it could only be done," ejaculated Queen Esther, her dark eyes glowing, a look of venomous hatred showing upon her face.

"Even if it could, how would that help us out?" grumbled Tom King, whose wits seemed unusually dense just then. "No such charge would hold, for, bitterly as I hate the fellow, I know he's got a clean record to back him up."

"Shut up, Tom," impatiently snapped his brother, his head sinking upon one palm, the elbow supported by his knee. "Let me think it over for a bit. If—it surely ought to work. Unless—would Eagle bite at the bait, though?"

"Can you furnish the legal blanks, first thing?" persisted Mr. Thompson.

"I might—yes, I can do that," lifting his head, with an air of decision. "I've got the free run of old Dignan's office, and I know he is fully stocked up with everything of the sort. Brought them with him from Denver, thinking he'd do a land-office business in a newer place."

"And you can get them without arousing his suspicions?"

"A backload, if necessary, yes."

"Then I'll answer for the rest of the job," declared Thompson, with an air of decided relief.

"So you agreed to answer for this job," cut in Tom King, feeling just ugly enough to take the contrary direction to his mates. "And if ever Lucky Jackson gets squarely on his pins again, be mighty sure he will call on you for an accounting, too."

"Long before that can take place, I'll be filling a high lot on the hillside, or I'll have fixed Gentleman Joe for that elevated station," pleasantly retorted Mr. Thompson,

now in good humor once more. "If I can point to that grassy grave as evidence of my honesty of purpose, I reckon I can coax Lucky Jackson to forego massacring me, don't you think, good friends?"

"If!"

"Oh, hush, Tom! You begin to make me tired," elegantly reproved Queen Esther, whose suspicions had gradually faded away before the confident speech of their new ally. "Go on, Thompson; how do you hope to win over Horace Eagle?"

"That ought to be about the hardest part of it all," admitted the fertile-witted gentleman, with a confident smile. "But, even though he will probably be offish toward me, after the hot raking down Gentry gave me to-day, after the main show was over that very fact will only help us out."

"How so? Come to the point, man!"

"You'll all appreciate that same point all the more thoroughly, I fancy, if you first see me smooth away each real or imaginary obstacle, in the order you present them," blandly spoke the fellow, plainly enjoying his importance.

"You'll admit, I think, that the worthy marshal holds precious little love for the Royal Flush as a unit?"

"Granted without division," grimly said Tom King.

"Thanks. And, after my share in this day's work, I reckon he'll have an even worse opinion of poor me."

"That's a point I've been trying to make. He'll never fall in with your scheme, even in seeming."

"When I show him those papers, filled out according to rule, how can he help doing so, my dear sir?"

"He'll swear they are just as much of a fraud as you are, of course."

"Just so, but still I'll bring him to Limerick. For one thing, I'll make the right sort of opening. I'll get Eagle off apart from Gentleman Joe, and then let him take his choice: either to go along and see that Gentry has fair play, or have me call a posse, every one of which shall be the Sport's enemies."

"You all know that Eagle thinks Gentry is a little red god on ten wheels, and that he'd willingly risk his own life rather than have harm come to his friend. But you'd ought to know, too, that the law is still higher in his estimation; he eats, drinks, lives, and says prayers to and by the law."

"Well, once more; I'll summon Eagle to help me make that arrest, and you'll see that he will agree to it, if only to make sure no foul play comes to the Sport."

"Granting that you do all this, how about the rest?" slowly asked Asa King, his heavy brows gathered in deep thought the while.

Beyond a doubt he was mentally agreed to the bold scheme, and was only trying to see the way clear to turning it to the good of the Royal Flush.

"That part of it ought to be still easier to shape," came the prompt reply, for Mr. Thompson had an answer ready for each objection or query as it was presented him. "Say I make this arrest, as I agree to do. Say I fool Eagle into chipping in, as stated! Well, then here comes the rich kernel."

"I'll hustle Gentleman Joe out of town before the crowd can catch wind of what's going on right under their noses. I'll take, say, one friend on whom I can depend to protect myself against Eagle's helping the criminal turn tables upon me."

"Do you follow my meaning so far, friends?"

Mr. Thompson laughed softly as he put this question, rubbing his hands together in almost ghoulish satisfaction as he caught that swift interchange of glances.

"You've begun it, go on to the end, pardner," quietly said Ace.

"That can be briefly put, now the main points have been cleared away. We'll take our prisoner away in a stage, as being safest and least liable to exposure to observation; for, of course, I'll insist on our prize wearing bracelets."

"Would it be the first time a stage has been held up by masked and disguised road-agents, my dear friends?"

Mr. Thompson laughed once more; a sound ugly to hear it was, too.

"You mean?"

"That either Gentleman Joe has got to croak, or he'll beat the Royal Flush, just as he's taken a public oath to

do," sternly declared Mr. Thompson. "If he's killed by road-agents, who can say whose hand did the deed? And even if a few ill-natured people do whisper a bit, what harm, so long as proof is lacking?"

"But Eagle?"

"Might buck against heavy odds to save his own life, but never to save a criminal fugitive from the law. And he'll be our best witness, when all's done; can't you see the point?"

"I can," cried Queen Esther, with decision. "And I'll agree to lure Gentleman Joe out of town, so you can arrest him without witnesses."

CHAPTER XVII.

WALKING INTO THE SNARE.

Hardscrabble confidently expected a series of entertainments, at least equal if not superior to the little "circus" given them by the Gilt-Edged Sport, and Lucky Jackson.

Hard words had passed between Gentleman Joe and the chief of the Royal Flush, two members of which had now "taken their gruel," not to mention the affair of the "doctored" guns, when such pointed talk had been measured out unto Mr. William Thompson.

Even Gentleman Joe himself appeared to take this view of the matter, since he confined himself almost entirely to the Occidental Hotel, polite, suave, graceful as ever, yet never for an instant off his guard while there was a possibility of an attack being made.

During the day-time he was generally to be seen seated upon the piazza, smoking solitarily, or quietly giving and taking comfort in company with one or more of his friends. Whenever he retired to his room, he invariably left word to that effect at the office.

Yet the second day had come since that duel, and not a word had been brought from Ace King or his twin brother, to hint that they were not entirely satisfied with the manner in which that little venture panned out. Not a remonstrance from Mr. Thompson against the insult which had been flung in his teeth on that same day.

That second day was one half spent. Dinner had been finished, and a few of the Occidental boarders were seated upon the veranda, kissing pipe or cigar, lazily talking, or indolently listening.

Gentleman Joe was with, yet hardly of, them. Seemingly in a much less happy mood than usual, Gentry was seated apart from the rest, and having his attention uncalled upon, he was the first to take notice of a slouching figure which came into view around the nearest corner, kicking up a cloud of dust with the bare feet which zigzagged from one side of the street to the other, yet gradually came nearer the hotel.

The "Kid" was a notable character of Hardscrabble, and he who had to take a second glance before recognizing that young gentleman, at once registered himself a tenderfoot, only just dropped down and in.

Listlessly enough Gentleman Joe watched that ragged, dirty, greasy, disreputable-looking figure, but it was more after a kill-time manner than aught else. Yet he gave a slight start as the Kid, when directly opposite his chair, deftly gave Gentry a glimpse of an envelope, or folded bit of writing paper.

Without word or further sign, the Kid passed lazily on, until at the next corner. Then he turned about on one horny heel, his arms going out as though to maintain his balance; but one of them made the sign for which Gentleman Joe was covertly watching.

He instantly rose to his feet, and quietly said:

"See you later, gentlemen. Reckon I'll take a bit of a stroll down toward Eagle's. Haven't seen him since yesterday. Must be sick, or something worse. Ta-ta, all!"

Instantly those addressed were upon the keen alert, yet they could see nothing to confirm those sudden suspicions. Not a soul was in sight save their own company, and if any one among them had noticed the Kid while passing, that clew told them nothing.

Gentleman Joe left the veranda, walking leisurely off in the direction of the city marshal's office, which happened to be the same as that taken by the ragged youth. He did not glance back, for he felt fairly confident his

bland hint would prove sufficient; had he wished for company, he surely would have asked for it.

Turning the same corner around which the Kid had disappeared from view, Gentleman Joe saw that worthy only a few rods ahead, still drawing patterns with his feet in the dusty road, apparently without a care or a regret in life.

Not until another corner was turned, did the ragged youth permit himself to be overtaken, and then, with a knowing grin upon his freckled face, he slipped a small-sized envelope into Gentry's hand as one of his eccentric zigzags carried him close past the Sport.

"From whom, Kid?" asked Gentleman Joe, tossing a coin before the lad, who dextrously caught it up in one of the hands which aided his body in turning a flip-flap, then called back as he trotted away:

"Ax me no questions, an' I'll tell ye no lies, Josey!"

A quick glance around assured Gentleman Joe that no curious eyes were upon him just then, and tearing open the envelope, he glanced rapidly over the inclosure—half a sheet of note-paper, across which a hasty pen had traced the words:

"MR. GENTRY:—A lady in distress, earnestly begs your advice, and in the name of the mother who bore you, prays that you may grant her an interview. If this prayer is granted—which kind Heaven permit!—please lift your hat, wiping your brow with a handkerchief."

There was no signature, and Gentleman Joe smiled oddly as he cast a quick glance around him, without result, if he really expected to behold the writer of that curious request.

He hesitated for a few seconds, long enough to once again glance over those words; but then he acted precisely as directed, even while a skeptical smile curled his mustached lips.

Scarcely had he brushed the handkerchief across his forehead, than he caught sight of a woman's figure moving across the next corner, and as he stared, wide-eyed, there came the answering flutter of a snowy handkerchief.

Instinctively his hands dropped to the weapons partially hidden by his coat, but then, that smile turning a bit harder, he stepped briskly forward, his gaze fixed upon that dark-clad figure.

Such shapes, so clad, were by no means numerous in Hardscrabble at that day, and Gentleman Joe must have been blind indeed had he remained long in doubt as to the real identity of that closely veiled person.

Beyond a doubt it was Mrs. Ace King, the Queen of the Royal Flush.

Yet he betrayed no uneasiness as he followed, now measuring his rate of progress by hers, yet carefully avoiding all appearance of being in pursuit, should curious eyes come that way.

The hour was admirably chosen so far as that point was concerned, however. This was the "sleepy hour" for such of the citizens as spent their time in town rather than in the mines, and very few persons were afoot. Then, too, the veiled woman chose a course by which the saloons were avoided, thus lessening the danger of meeting strays.

Only once did she take a glance backward, and that was a few seconds after abruptly altering her course. She seemed fully assured that, once granting her prayer, Gentleman Joe would not fail her until the end.

As for Gentry, his face was an enigma, just then. A faint smile was fixed upon his features, but whether of scorn, pleasure, doubt, or certainty, no man save himself could have told with certainty.

He quietly followed the lead of his temptress, showing no change of manner as they reached the outskirts of the town nor even when the woman in black led the way deeper into the broken region lying to the north and north-east of Hardscrabble.

He knew that his guide would show some sign when she was ready to grant the interview she had craved in writing, and if this was rather reversing those terms, what matter?

With all his seeming carelessness, considering the terms he was upon with the Royal Flush, added to the fact that his veiled guide was almost certainly one of that dangerous gang, Gentleman Joe was fully upon his guard, and believed he was acting all for the best.

He had waited for two weary days to hear further from the enemy, and knowing that the collision must surely come early or late, why not let it come now, if this was indeed a trap?

His sharp eyes kept roving around, now that ground more favorable for an ambuscade was being approached. One hand touched his sight-straightened gun, ready to pull and shoot at the word.

But neither sight nor sound came to justify such suspicions, and while still in fairly open ground, the woman in black turned to face him, one hand beckoning for a nearer approach, the other tossing back the heavy veil which had until that moment concealed her features.

It was indeed Mrs. Ace King and never since her first coming to Hardscrabble had Queen Esther looked more regally beautiful than right now.

Her color was rich, her cheeks aglow, her large eyes full of light, which was not all of peace or prayer, despite the words which first dropped from her full red-ripe lips:

"Have mercy, I pray you, Joseph Gentry!"

Gentleman Joe stopped short, like one taken wholly aback, but only for a single breath. Rallying, he lifted his hat with his left hand, bowing politely, even though his right fingers rested upon a pistol-butt.

"How can I serve you, madam?" he asked, courteously.

"Why are you hunting me down?" almost fiercely cried Queen Esther, flinging out a hand with a passionate gesture. "Why are you trying to ruin my hopes, my life?"

"You must be laboring under a wrong impression, madam," gravely replied the Sport, with another respectful bow, as he came nearer that figure. "I may be bad enough, but I never make war upon your sex, least of all one who—"

"Stop, sir!" sharply interposed the woman, her head going back with sudden dignity. "I did not ask you to bring fulsome compliments, nor did I come here to waste words in idle flirting."

"Your bearing the name of Mrs. King is proof sufficient, madam, even had your note led me to expect any such silly nonsense. It did not. I believed it the request of a lady, and I have answered it as such."

"I am Mrs. King, and I glory in that title, sir! Now, what harm have we ever done to you? Why are you giving us so much trouble? What makes you take the oath I've heard so often that it causes my brain to ring crazily?"

"By which you mean—"

"The vow you've made to beat the Royal Flush, as you call us, sir."

"You give me a very difficult task, Mrs. King," coolly spoke the Gilt-Edged Sport, drawing yet a little nearer, until scarcely two yards divided their persons. "I have an answer ready for that question, but I hardly know how to give it—to you."

"Are you afraid, Gentleman Joe?"

"Of you, madam, yes," with a bow. "If your husband were to put the same question, perhaps I might find courage sufficient to reply in different terms, though."

"Do you dare to threaten me, sir?"

"Pray don't think it, madam. Nothing is further from my purpose than to threaten—you. But if you will kindly postpone the question until one of your relatives can do the speaking for the Flush, I'll—"

That sentence was left incomplete, for Gentleman Joe caught sight and sound of human forms not far back of Queen Esther, and leaping forward, he flung one arm about her person, drawing his gun as he cried, sternly:

"Steady, all! Show fair cause, or good-by Queen Esther!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

GENTLEMAN JOE SUBMITS.

"Flag o' truce, Gentry!" came a well-known voice, and Horace Eagle flung up his empty hands while floundering through that tangle of scrubby bushes and loose rocks.

"Fer love o' heaven, man, don't hurt the madam!"

"You, marshal?" ejaculated Gentleman Joe, starting back a little, but his strong arm taking Queen Esther along. "What—ha! as his keen eyes detected other less friendly

faces. "If this is a trap, I'll play even as far as my cards go!"

Queen Esther, caught in such a manner that both arms were pinned to her sides, made no struggle, showed no fear for herself, but now she called forth in slightly quavering tones:

"Never mind me, Ace! Care for yourself, dear!"

"For I'll take care of your wife, Mr. King," sternly cried Gentleman Joe, his cocked revolver turning its muzzle squarely against that shapely head. "Flag of truce goes, but I'm taking no long chances with your outfit, bear in mind, sir!"

"Look out, you!" hoarsely came from the husband, as he stopped short in his advance. "Harm one hair of her head, and salt can't save you!"

"Don't be such a fool as to throw away your last chance, Mr. Gentry," added William Thompson, as his quota. "I've brought your friend, the city marshal, along as a guarantee that you'll be treated white."

"An' I swear you sha'n't come to no harm, pardner, ef you're clean honest," earnestly declared Horace Eagle, advancing once more, his guns drawn, but their muzzles turned toward his companions, rather than upon the Gilt-Edged Sport.

"You mean just that, Eagle?"

"On my sacred word o' honor, Gentry."

"That's good enough for me, so—asking your pardon for putting my arm where Ace King has filed a claim, Mrs. King!"

With those words Gentleman Joe released Queen Esther, stepping back a couple of paces, keeping his face to the foe, and his weapon ready for use in case of necessity.

"Talk out, fellows," he added, coldly. "You've lured me here for some particular purpose—just what may that purpose be?"

"To spare you the shame of an arrest before all Hard-scrabble," at once answered Mr. Thompson, his free hand pushing back his coat sufficiently to reveal a golden badge pinned to his waistcoat. "I am an officer of the law, and fully authorized to place you under arrest, Joseph Gentry."

"Indeed! May I ask for what particular crime, sir?"

"For stage-robbery, and killing a passenger who—"

"Why, you infernal liar!" exploded the Sport, in sudden rage.

"I jest knowed 'twas all a dug-gun fraud," hastily cried Eagle, but lifting up an imploring hand the while. "An' so help me prove it afore all the world, pardner! Don't give 'em a show fer playin' still wuss dirt onto ye, by buckin' ag'inst the law, sech as this yer critter hes at the back of o' him, but come 'long quiet, like, an' I'll see ye don't suffer none the wuss fer it, Gentry."

Mrs. King joined her husband, and Mr. Thompson seemed more than willing to let the city marshal argue the delicate point for him, although he was plainly holding himself in readiness to take harsher measures rather than permit his prize to escape him by flight or by fighting.

From almost any other lips, that hasty, barely cogent reasoning would hardly have convinced Gentleman Joe; but he knew that Horace Eagle was a true friend, and that he would not give his honor in pledge unless he felt fully capable of making those words good.

Still, it was hard to yield to such a black charge, and with a dark look at the self-proclaimed detective, Gentleman Joe repeated:

"That accusation is false, and no one knows better than you who make it, Mr. Thompson."

"If a lie, so much the worse for me, sir," came the cool response. "If you can prove an alibi, when given a preliminary examination, I'll have to suffer, won't I?"

"More than you calculated upon, perhaps."

"Meaning that you'll call me out, of course," with a half sneer.

"Hardly. I can fight with a gentleman, but I simply kill curs."

"Don't talk so ha'sh, gents, I'm beggin' of ye," implored Eagle, who seemed woefully out of his element just then, with duty pulling him one way, friendship tugging the other. "I know it's all a nasty mistake, but the best an'

the cheapest way o' gittin' at the truth, is to fetch out the bottom facts, an' so—"

"At what time and place was this alleged crime committed, sir?"

"On the line between Falcon City and Vinegar Flats, one year ago the seventeenth of last month," glibly answered Mr. Thompson.

"On that date I was living at Silver Gulch, as I can prove by two hundred respectable citizens, sir," coldly bowed the Gilt-Edged Sport.

"Still the distance is not so great but that you could cover it in a night well mounted, Mr. Gentry."

"Unfortunately—you are certain as to the date, of course?"

"Positive, yes. The seventeenth of May, last year."

"Unfortunately for you, then, you've picked out a day on which I was so particularly engaged that I can account for every minute of every hour, and if necessary to prove an alibi, I can bring reputable witnesses to help me account for a full day on either side of the seventeenth."

At that positive assertion, Horace Eagle gave a subdued howl of pure delight, hurling his hat high into the air, meeting it with an agile kick as it came sailing downward.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," with a half-sheepish bow toward Queen Esther, a moment later, "but I jest couldn't help—didn't I jest know it? Didn't I say, times 'thout number, that Gentleman Joe couldn't do ary sech dug gun dirty tricks as them? Didn't I, then?"

"Assertion is not actual proof, and I'll perform the duty assigned me, letting the consequences take care of themselves," sternly said the detective, adding, "Will you submit to arrest, Mr. Gentry, or must I use force?"

"One moment, sir. Am I to understand that you have enlisted Ace King as your deputy in this proposed arrest?"

"What has that got to do with it, sir?"

"Not a dug-gun thing, pardner," hastily interposed Eagle. "I'm one o' the posse, an' even ef he wanted to, King cain't do no dirt, fer—"

"I'll withdraw, if my company is objected to, so don't let that fact trouble your brain, Gentry."

"Not with my consent, you'll not, Mr. King," declared Thompson. "I have both the right and the power to press you into service, and since Eagle is openly the friend of Gentry, I'll have at least one guard on my side. If, not—"

"Spare your threats, sir," coldly cut in Gentleman Joe. "I might easily defy both you and your rights, but as that might give you a chance to play still worse dirt, I'll surrender, provided you can show papers to prove your claims."

Mr. Thompson instantly produced these, and stood warily by while Gentleman Joe, still holding his weapon ready, glanced over the papers.

If he hoped to find a palpable flaw, he was disappointed. So far as he could see, everything was in due form, and gave the detective full authority not only to arrest the accused, but to command such a posse as the safe conduct of his prisoner might require.

"So fur's they go, it's on the dead level, pardner," said Horace Eagle, soberly. "I tuck mighty good keer to make sur o' that, fust off, which is why I hain't come to see you fer so long."

"You surely do not believe me guilty of this foul crime, Eagle?"

"I'd a mighty sight quicker think I done it my own self," almost indignantly exploded the worthy marshal. "Ef I'd 'a' thunk that way, would I be hyar, actin' in' this manner? Would I 'a' 'sisted on hevin' the job jobbed so as to keep the hull durn town from smokin' it? Would I 'a' stuck out fer kiverin' it all over, so that even the dug-gundest fool flannel-mouth in the kentry couldn't never hev a chance fer to fling out his hints o'—of course I didn't bl'eeve it, Josey!"

"Haven't we wasted time and breath enough, Mr. Gentry?" coldly asked the detective. "Although you've hardly treated me as one gentleman should treat another, I've shown you far greater consideration than my mission fully warrants."

"By doctoring my guns the other day, do you mean, Mr. Thompson?"

"I've denied that charge once, and don't think it

necessary to do so again. Would I be so foolish as to scheme for the death of one, by arresting whom I'll get a heavy reward?"

"The warrant says dead or alive, I believe," dryly retorted Gentry.

"I'm working for credit as well as cash, my dear sir," blandly added the detective, with a low bow: "Arresting a corpse would bring very little of the first. But I'll not argue the point further; the facts remain just the same, and—will you submit quietly?"

"Will you stay with me, Eagle?"

"You bet I will, posse or no posse," declared the city marshal. "Ef Thompson kicks ag'inst that, I'll down him, or he'll down me, fer keeps!"

"I've already agreed that you shall bear us company to the end of the route, Mr. Eagle, hence your threats come in very poor taste. Now, for the last time, sir, submit, or I'll take you by force!"

"And show your prudence by first obtaining my pledge," sneered the Gilt-Edged Sport, reversing his gun and offering its butt to the city marshal as he added, "I'd rather trust my tools in your hands than in any other, Eagle, for I reckon they'll be less liable to take an awkward twist. Help yourself to my other, for Mr. Thompson looks rather nervous; and he might think I meant business were I to draw."

"Have your jest, Mr. Gentry, since I've got you," chuckled the detective, putting up his own weapon now that his prisoner was fairly disarmed. "Now I'll prove that I'm whiter than you seem inclined to give me credit for, Mr. Eagle."

"Right afore the two eyes o' ye, stranger."

"You understand the arrangements made; explain to Mr. Gentry."

"It's like this, pardner," the marshal complied. "I held out fer keepin' it as secret as mought be, to steer clear o' both row an' talk. Thar's a stage cached over yen' way, waiting fer us. We'll jest taken it on the quiet, an' ef you want ary thing from the hotel, jest send a line to the boss, an' it'll be fetch'd out to ye."

"I left my room locked, and I reckon my goods will be safe until I can return to look after them. I have all I require, on my person."

"Then that part's settled. I'm gwine to stay by ye, ontel we've showed Thompson how mighty nigh akin he is to that colt hist'ry tells 'bout. Ary thing furdur, stranger?"

"Nothing, I believe. To show how far I trust you both, go across to the stage by yourselves. I'll meet you there, inside of the hour, with just one good man to hold things even between us. Come, Mr. King, we might as well be moving toward town, don't you reckon?"

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. THOMPSON UNMASKS.

This rather peculiar distribution of forces was carried out, the detective—to grant him his claims—bearing King and Queen company back to Hardscrabble, while Horace Eagle guided the prisoner across to where the stage-coach had been placed in waiting for their use.

Ace King looked dark and gloomy, and had very little to say during their short walk, but Queen Esther was less guarded, and poured forth her objections to running so great a risk after having gained full possession of their victim.

"He'll never go there, and I know it! He'll either talk Horace Eagle into playing a cross, and take leg bail to prove Thompson a fraud, or down the gaunt fool, or lay for you on your road around."

"I don't think that way, nor will you, ma'am, when you've had time to give it all a good, cool think over," quietly answered Mr. Thompson. "Besides showing Gentleman Joe that no worse harm than an arrest for a square trial is intended on my side, 'twill complete the winning of Eagle's good opinion. After this, how can he even suspect that our finger directs the hand that grips the gun that wipes out Gentry. Regular Jack-built affair, isn't it, now?"

Mr. Thompson gave an amused chuckle, but his present

companions felt far less assured, even though Ace King sternly checked his wife when she offered still further objections.

"Right or wrong, Queen, the cards are dealt, and hands filled the best our luck could catch. Now it's win or lose, and if we can make that winning any surer by giving Eagle a bit of a bluff, why not?"

"Then, too, I'll be within easy reach as a scape-goat," laughingly added Mr. Thompson.

His perfect assurance produced very nearly the effect desired before town was gained and good-by said to Queen Esther, for the time being.

All essential arrangements had been perfected during those two days through which Gentleman Joe kept waiting for the next card from the Royal Flush, and there was very little to delay Mr. Thompson and his special deputy at Hardscrabble.

They left town together, and hastened directly to the point where the stage had been stationed, out of sight and sound of the regular route, but where access was easy.

While on their way, Ace King asked, among other things:

"If Horace tries to cut up rusty when it comes to the bracelets, what must I do?"

"He'll surely listen to reason, when it comes with a taste of the law he worships," half-maliciously declared the detective. "Still, I can't afford to take too long chances, and I'll have Gentleman Joe in irons, or know the reason why. All I ask is for you to stand back until I call on you for help."

"And when you do call?"

"Enforce my orders, if you have to kill both Gentry and Eagle."

This stern speech appeared to content Ace King, so far as action after reaching the conveyance was concerned, but it was not until he caught a fair glimpse of those two figures waiting near the old stage-coach, that his satisfaction became complete.

"Didn't I tell you so, pardner?" muttered Thompson, his eyes gleaming as this fact was ascertained.

"Seeing is believing, but nothing less could have made me feel sure of it," in the same guarded tones, answered King, adding hurriedly, "I'll trust you in all else, pardner, be mighty sure!"

Mr. Thompson greeted the two gentlemen in waiting with his blandest bow and smoothest words, expressing his sincere regret at having kept them in suspense, even for so short a time.

This was mainly for the benefit of the driver, who certainly had not been taken into confidence, being a success on the box, possibly because he was absolutely unfitted for any other occupation in life.

At his polite gesture, Gentleman Joe and Horace Eagle entered the stage, followed quickly by the other couple. The door was closed, word given the driver to strike the main trail as quickly as might be, then follow directions already given him.

Not a word passed between the men until the smoother rolling told of their having entered upon the main road; but then Mr. Thompson said, in firm, yet matter-of-fact tones:

"Of course you'll not object to wearing these jewels for a short while, Mr. Gentry?"

Gentleman Joe gave a little start as the detective produced a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs, but before he could utter his objections, Horace Eagle reached out for them, then almost coaxingly spoke to his friend:

"It's no more'n the law says, pardner, an' ef I put 'em on—kin I?"

For a single breath it began to look as though trouble must break forth, then and there, but then Gentleman Joe submitted, holding forth his hands in silence. Eagle adjusted the cuffs, then gave a half-groan as he sank back in his seat once more.

"It's a blasted shame, an' Id' see ye both in the middle of hades fust, ef 'twasn't that we both 'low fer to make ye pay double over fer all the dirt you've bin chuckin' onto us—so thar!"

"Meaning after Mr. Gentry proves his alibi, of course, marshal?"

"Just that, dug-gun ye! Ontel then, you've got the law

a backin', though I'd hate to say jest how you twisted that 'round so pizen crooked as to get it like this."

"Maybe the law back in God's country comes in different packages from that they hang up in the city marshal's window, Mr. Eagle, out here in the wilderness."

"Waal, them as they send fer to tote that law looks mighty sight that way anyway!"

Gentleman Joe, once in irons, leaned back in his corner, seemingly resigned to this ugly stroke of fate, and now he bade Eagle cut no more words to waste.

"Let them vent their spite in talk, if that pleases them, so long as they don't try to back words up by deeds."

For some little time after this speech, silence was maintained, but then, as though unable to keep his tongue in chains longer, Mr. Thompson once more turned it loose.

"Since you've given us permission to talk, Gentry, maybe I'd better say a little more, to in part clear my record, so far as Hardscrabble goes. I'm not altogether proud of it, even while aware that you must know we detectives are privileged to stretch the truth, even to the verge of lying."

"For one thing, I wanted to make perfectly sure you were my Gentleman Joe; I knew of another once who was a regular Bowery thug and tough, whose manliest exploit was sandbagging a tipsy sport, the better to go through his clothes."

"And then, when I felt morally certain you were the original Jacobs I had an ugly dilemma to face; how was I to get you safely out of town and into irons without giving your friends and backers time and opportunity to down me, and so help you rise again?"

"And that's right where the funny part begins, Joe Gentry!" broke forth Ace King, with vicious triumph in his face and his tones. "You openly made your brags that you'd beat the Royal Flush clean out of sight, and after you made such a pretty beginning Thompson knew right where to turn for solid backing."

"Between us this neat little trick was turned, and now—tell me honestly—what do you reckon your life chances are worth?"

Ace King paused for a reply, but it came in a vastly different shape from any which he could possibly have anticipated.

Horace Eagle flung both muscular arms about him, holding him as in a vise, at the same time pressing head against face, his soft felt hat serving admirably as a gag for the instant.

Gentleman Joe jerked the handcuffs from his own wrists, and deftly placed them upon those of the astounded villain, moving so swiftly that the deed was accomplished before Ace King could realize what was happening.

Then he began to struggle, trying to call aloud on the detective for assistance, but as he contrived to free his eyes from that smothering hat 'twas only to behold a revolver almost touching his face.

"You, Thompson!" he gasped, hoarsely, his straining muscles relaxing.

"I, Harold Catherwood, my dear sir," quickly corrected the detective, as he sent that ugly muzzle a little further forward, the cold iron sending a chill through King's person as it touched the bridge of his nose. "You're wanted, my man, and I really reckon I've got you at last."

All this had taken place with such rapidity and ease, thanks to the completeness of that surprise, that the driver had not been disturbed at all, and still kept up his more or less melodious whistling as he tooled "the hearse" onward.

But now, fairly realizing how completely he had been duped by the doubly disguised detective, and heedless of his being ironed, Ace King gave vent to a wild, hoarse roar of furious hatred, flinging himself against the detective, trying to grasp some part of his person with his gnashing teeth, at the same time attempting to draw a revolver with his hampered hands.

But Gentleman Joe had already cut his belt, and jerked it clear in time to foil that forlorn hope, while Horace Eagle once more secured the hold so desperately broken.

The driver, startled half out of his wits by that furious roar, jerked up his team as speedily as possible, but ere

the stage quite came to a halt Horace Eagle was able to issue a stern command:

"Keep in motion, Frisbie, ontel I say pull up! All's right in hyar, an' no business o' yourn anyhow."

Powerful man though he was, with strength fairly doubled for the minute by the awful conviction that he, not Gentleman Joe, had fallen blindly into a death-trap, Ace King was unable to cope with such long odds, and within five minutes from the time the first active move was made, the chief of the Royal Flush was helplessly bound and gagged, wholly at the mercy of his captors.

Then Harold Catherwood—no longer "Mr. William Thompson"—spoke out:

"Time for the next move, gentlemen, unless we want to run squarely into the ambushade. Call a halt, Eagle. You manage matters with the driver, as we agreed, while Gentry and I care for King."

Sam Frisbie promptly obeyed the call given by the city marshal, of whose authority he stood in almost mortal awe. The stage came to a halt, the door opened, and Ace King was bundled forth, Catherwood on one side, Gentleman Joe on the other, as he was hurried out of the road and into a narrow trail leading away almost at right angles.

"You hain't seed nothin', nur you don't know nothin', Sammy, more'n that you was told to turn back to town. Nur you needn't say even so much, onless you jest hev to do it. Sabe that?"

CHAPTER XX.

THE ROYAL FLUSH BEATEN.

Fully satisfied that Horace Eagle was competent to hold his end level, the other two men hurried their prisoner along, over or around the thick-lying rocks, only pausing when Ace King sullenly let his legs give way beneath his weight, falling to the ground in a limp heap.

"Never bother about holding him up, Gentry," said the detective, with a short, amused laugh. "We'll wait here for Eagle, and then it'll be an easy matter to carry the fellow to the horses, or else fetch the animals to him."

They caught the sound of wheels on the flinty road, and knew that Eagle had turned the driver back to Hardscrabble, as agreed upon.

A few moments later the marshal came in sight, slackening his pace as he noted the little group.

"Hellow! hed a break-down so quick?"

"Just a case of balk," responded the detective. "All's right at your end, of course?"

"Right as right! Sammy's so mighty bad mixed up over it all that he couldn't tell a straight story even ef he was to try. An' all them what knows 'nough to ax him any sech questions I reckon is jest the other way from which he's steerin'."

"Except Queen Esther!"

"Oh, she don't count, fer she's so mighty sure the Flush is on top that she wouldn't b'lieve her own eyes ef they was to tell her dif'rent. An' now—shell we tote the critter?"

Catherwood cast a glance around them before answering.

"Reckon 'twould be just as well. We're rather close to the trail now, and I can't afford to run any extra chances."

Eagle stooped to gather up the prisoner's feet, narrowly escaping a kick that surely would have marred his facial beauty for all-time to come had it taken the effect intended.

"Play mule, will ye, critter?" he grinningly asked, then drew back to produce a coil of small but strong rope from one of his capacious pockets, deftly fashioning a noose in an-end as he added, "Waal, you hain't got a mule's tail fer twistin', but you've got a neck as mought as well git used to bein' stretched."

"Now, jest make your 'lection, Ace; walk like a man, or be drug like stone-boat!"

He tossed the noose over King's head, tightening it coolly, then paused for a decision. Neither of the others made a move to interfere, and realizing the worse than folly of holding out Ace King rose to his feet unaided.

His tongue was powerless, thanks to the gag, but there was death in his furiously glowing eyes as they flashed from face to face.

Little cared his captors for that, however, and they hurried their captive onward, pausing only when arriving at the spot where four good horses, ready for the road, were standing in waiting.

Harold Catherwood laughed grimly as he took note of that furious glare, and drawing a knife he cut away the gag which had been forced so unceremoniously between those strong jaws, saying:

"Have a little patience, friends, for I dare say Mr. King is bothering his poor brain over this precious tangle, and I don't care to take in a raving lunatic."

The first use the prisoner made of his tongue was to pour forth a flood of oaths, curses, threats, and denunciations. Standing about him, in such a manner that any attempt on his part to break away in flight was worse than vain, the three captors quietly allowed him to exhaust his fury for the time being.

Then, in cold, even tones, Harold Catherwood spoke again:

"You're simply exposing yourself to ridicule, Ace King, since you seem to prefer passing by that title just now. What you so roundly condemn as an outrage against yourself is not half so bad as the dose you supposed you were mixing for Gentleman Joe here."

"I'll even up if it—"

"That's your privilege, if you can fairly claim it, of course. All you have to do is to show the honorable court and intelligent jury that you didn't kill Alfred Hicks, the cattle man, at Kansas City, on—"

"I never! You can't prove it. Curse you for—"

and another storm of blasphemy began to issue from his froth-tinged lips.

Catherwood made a sign which Eagle understood, and the prisoner was once more gagged despite his desperate struggles.

"You bring this upon yourself, King," sternly added the detective when that deed was completed. "I prefer treating you half way white, but since you'll not have it so so let it be."

"You can listen or not, just as you see fit, but in simple justice to myself and these gentlemen I feel bound to explain the part I played in Hardscrabble of late."

"Two years ago and over a rich stock-grower and dealer named Alfred Hicks was murdered for his money in Kansas City. His assassin was a comparative stranger, but a positive description was obtained, and heavy rewards offered for his arrest."

"For nearly two years not another clew was found, but then I learned that a possible strike might be made up in this region. That hint brought me to Hardscrabble, duly authorized to arrest my man if I was so lucky as to find him."

"I found two men, either of whom apparently would fill the bill, although both wore full beards, while the assassin had worn his face smooth-shaven."

"That doubt as to which one of you brothers was my real game led to my playing my cards as I have, and while I'm about it I might as well tell you just how difficult a task I found that double-play."

"First, Gentleman Joe chipped in, and the result was a row with one of the two men I was testing. I was unwillingly drawn into the muss, which by no means improved my chances, as you'd ought to realize."

"I was in a manner forced to ally myself with Gentry, but before I did that I tested him by a cock and bull story. I found him entirely too fly for that, and in the end I frankly told him the whole truth."

"Then, that same night, I came to you brothers, with the lie which I had fixed up with Gentleman Joe. You doubted me, so I played the limits, for I would not—could not afford to, in fact—show my real hand until dead sure which bird it ought to close upon."

"You know the rest, without my going into particulars. I did cripple those guns, but Gentleman Joe knew what I was about, and only put off the declaration until it was too late for Lucky Jackson to back out of the duel he was so hungry for."

"The seeming quarrel which followed was only to revive

your faith in me as an ally, and you know how well it worked, and how promptly you agreed to my next proposal. But why go on further?

"You laid a snare for Gentleman Joe, and have fallen into it yourself. You stationed a gang of your cut-throats, under command of Tom King, to waylay the stage, and murder Gentry, while I'm going to convey you to Kansas City, there to have a fair trial for your life."

Doubtless Ace King would have said plenty by way of reply, only for that gag, but without giving him another chance he was lifted bodily and bound securely to the saddle worn by one of the four horses.

Mounting the others, his captors struck out at a pace as rapid as the nature of the ground would permit, never drawing rein again until the stage-road was struck, miles beyond the spot where Tom King had placed his ruffians in ambush, murder in their hearts.

By that time night had fallen, and as the nearest town was yet a long distance ahead it was determined to leave the trail, passing back among the hills far enough to be in no danger of discovery should the gang attempt chase that night, and there go into camp.

This was done, and the night was passed without anything occurring to give trouble or uneasiness. But before sleep came to their eyes the three men earnestly and thoroughly discussed the situation.

Both Gentry and Eagle volunteered to bear the detective company until far beyond all danger of a rescue, but he refused to accept their services.

"I've handled even more dangerous characters, and I can handle this one. Besides, I'll have a guard of my own at Camptown, where I left word for them to wait, unless I asked them to come farther."

"Don't forget that, though you've beaten the Royal Flush, a dangerous remnant is left, and you'd better be back at Hardscrabble, to counteract the mischief they'll almost surely attempt, when they tumble to this little trick."

When morning came the party separated, Harold Catherwood to convoy his prisoner toward Kansas City, the others bidding him good luck, and sincerely regretting the obstinacy with which he declined their further escort.

He seemed to take their offer as a slur against his courage, and his last refusal came almost too bluntly.

After that there was nothing left but to give him his own way, and with a last hand-clasp the party divided, Horace Eagle heading directly for Hardscrabble, while Gentleman Joe turned north, cutting across lots, having a matter of business to look after in Jim Dandy, a neighboring mining camp.

And so we leave them for the present, Ace King being carried eastward to meet his doom, the worthy city marshal returning to his post of duty, Gentleman Joe taking a brief trip on important business.

He knew that he had kept the vow he had so boldly made in public—the Royal Flush had been beaten!

Did the "fragments" spoken of by Harold Catherwood, the Kansas City detective, really give the "trouble" he predicted?

They certainly did, and Gentleman Joe was a prominent figure in that same difficulty, too, but, in the words of a greater light, "that's another story."

[THE END.]

"BUFFALO BILL'S LONG TRAIL," by E. W. Wheeler, will be published in the next number (160) of THE LOG CABIN LIBRARY.

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